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BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS.

VOL. III.

BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS

BY

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'A MOORLAND IDYL,' 'A VILLAGE HAMPDEN,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :

HURST AND BLACKETT, LIMITED,
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1893.

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BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS.

CHAPTER I.

RECONCILIATION.

IT rained again in the night; but, when Barbara looked from her window at about six o'clock, it was a clear still morning. She dressed with no peculiar care, but quickly and silently, for the room adjoined that occupied by her father. When Diall descended half-an-hour later, he found awaiting him in the parlour a plateful of what he generally termed 'the ideal'

bread and butter, daintily exposed, and beside it a tumbler of milk with an obvious cream upon it. As he was rubbing his hands complacently, Barbara entered noiselessly from behind, and he turned and embraced her.

‘Anything else?’ she said, pointing to the table.

‘The ideal thing,’ he replied, and proceeded to commence upon it. ‘No sound in your father’s room. You heard nothing? I think we shall manage it admirably. What an exquisite morning. Just . . .’

They went out together, and when in the front Barbara pointed out her father’s window, an old mullioned window with the ivy clustering round it, in which, as the sun now struck it, the white blind

still down contrasted conspicuously with the wet, glistening leaves which formed its frame. After giving it a kindly smile they turned away.

‘What if he is peeping from behind it?’ said Diall.

‘He would not be Bezaleel Winnett,’ was the laughing reply. ‘He is sound asleep. He has a most enviable capacity for it. He is up the instant he is awake. But come, we must get on.’

They went down the farm road to the highway, and turned away from the village. Everything was drenched with rain, but in the warm, brilliant sunshine of this early morning the moisture only served to impart additional freshness and fragrance to the sparkling atmosphere. The rain, too, seemed to have been condensed into

a silvery dew, which lay like a dazzling bloom over the surface of the meadows. As they passed through a field of oats, hoary for the sickle, Diall exclaimed ecstatically at the marvellous phenomenon presented,—the whole one glistening sea, for the opening husk of every grain held a raindrop in its tiny jaws. No wonder that their hearts were light, and that they felt aggressively at peace with every man. It was a suitable bridal morning, instituted for their peculiar behoof.

Hand in hand they went, despite the progress of the thirties. Life burnt clearly in them yet, and perhaps both were conscious that this day would come to them but once, and were consequently intent upon draining the goblet which kind fate was so benignly pressing to their lips,—

pressing with such peculiar heartiness as to suggest a generous regret at the tardiness of its bestowal. Earth and sky threw smiles upon them, and they could but smile rapturously in return.

Even Barbara admitted to herself that she had never suspected life of holding such dainties in its lap,—at any rate for her. She naturally recalled that day some months ago amongst the pictures,—the other brightest record of her existence,—but in comparison that seemed dead. It lacked wholly the peculiar glow which imparted to this its enravishing vitality. Yet another field they passed through, and so came to the margin of the wood. Here they paused. The path was not so well trodden beyond, and the moisture was manifest. Diall looked at his watch.

They could already hear flies humming in the trees, and the air seemed heavier here, by reason perhaps of the prevailing aroma from the marsh-mint in blossom along the hedgerow. This excited Roger's attention, and he glanced at the objects about him. On one side lay the bog, but on the other a dry bank on which a foxglove blossomed. Towards this latter the man stepped, and came back in peculiar triumph.

‘That, Barbara, is conclusive. Reserved by fate for you. You will wear that, at least.’

‘Yes, dear, I will wear that.’ And her eyes sparkled.

Roger placed in her breast a single fragile harebell, snow-white instead of blue.

Yes, the slight incident obviously

pleased her, and, needless to say, Diall with her. He placed his two hands upon her shoulders, and forthwith abandoned himself to his blissful mood. When Roger meant it, as now he did, he could be as forcibly ideal as his friend Rowe, and every bit as theoretic. But as his doctrine of the married life, at any rate in its general tenor, was not purely original, and has been perhaps as adequately expressed before, there is no reason to deprive Barbara of the privilege of being the sole recipient of its wisdom. It was gratifying enough to her ear, and so no doubt more than justified its once-more repetition. A woodpecker heard it, too, clinging to a great elm-tree near at hand, alternately throwing back his head to listen and tap-tapping his approval on the bark. As

Roger finished, the impertinent animal flung his glistening colours into the sun, and in his ungainly dipping flight rent the still air with a peal of his shrillest laughter—Ya-ya-ya-ya-ya! Ya-ya-ya-ya-ya!—until the woods rang with his unbecoming mirth, and Barbara and Diall were constrained to take part in it.

The clergyman was issuing from his garden gate at an unaccustomed hour that morning, and the clerk he found already at the church. Diall's purse had commanded secrecy, and as the church stood at a distance of two fields from the village nobody had observed the unusual movements. The sun's rays shot-in aslant through the southern windows, illuminating the venerable interior, and disguising by its genial suggestion the architectural

coldness of the walls. It was a severely plain little edifice, cruciform in shape, with the north and south arms curtained off for the purposes of vestry and belfry respectively, and what was left fitted with dark box-pews dating from a restoration in the forties. A screen and two steps guarded the chancel, and it was just by the side of these that the parson and clerk were standing.

‘ Singular way of doing things, clerk,’ the former was observing. ‘ It wouldn’t content all young women.’

‘ That it wouldn’t, sir, not by a dale,’ was the jocular response. ‘ But ’twere ever a curious family. My grandfather had a strange lot o’ tales about ’em. But begging your pardon, sir, be Mr. Rowe gone for good, do you think?’

‘ Oh, dear, no. What’s given you that idea?’

‘ Well, I thought as it couldn’t be so no how; but James Stanley told I as report said that he had quarrelled most despert with Master Winnett. You’ll excuse my tongue, sir.’

‘ In that case the departure would have to be on the other side, I think, clerk.’

‘ Just as I thought it, sir. “But Mr. Rowe be master now, James,” said I. Your words prove me to be in the right, sir. “The difference be with the daughter, James, if it be anywhere,” said I.’

The old man looked at the clergyman inquiringly, but the latter, not feeling inclined to prolong the gossip, led the way to the vestry. In a few minutes there were the sounds of footsteps in the porch.

Barbara and Diall had retraced their steps to the village. Both owned a feeling of trepidation as they put foot upon the blue stone pavement which crossed the pasture field adjoining the graveyard, and they proceeded silently. The laugh of another woodpecker came from a distance, and some rooks cawed from the elm-trees by the church, but other birds were silent. At the porch they paused, and Diall, pressing his companion's hand, whispered encouragement to her. Barbara had but just raised her eyes to the tower, and in doing so had caught sight of a hideous visage of a gargoyle. It was the resulting gesture which was possibly misunderstood by Roger. Barbara instantly took his arm, and they entered the sunlit building.

The ceremony was accomplished with-

out the assistance of a single spectator. According to pre-arrangement, the duty of giving the bride away was undertaken by the clerk, and satisfactorily fulfilled. Fees were paid, register signed, and hands shaken, then the united were at liberty to depart. The rector followed, to his breakfast; and, after locking up the church, the clerk to proclaim the news to the village.

On her way home Barbara tried strenuously to offer but an every-day appearance, whatever the inward protest of her emotions. No woman of the smallest reflective tendencies could pass through the ordeal with indifference ; and Barbara, although able, nay, anxious to forego everything of a ceremonial assertion of its significance, did not affect to be heedless. It was a vital

moment for her,—not as the mere apotheosis of sentimentalism, as with some of the younger of us; how much less of mere social aggrandisement, as with others rather older. Mainly as a record of one of the supreme junctures of life did the moment fascinate Barbara. She was conscious of an inordinate craving for human experience,—only the mere glow of life could fundamentally move her. The work of this morning, she was old enough to recognise as one of its most momentous achievements, and she was consequently eager to feel and to prove it to the full.

The degree of light-heartedness of which she was capable amazed her. If this day, with its wealth of sunshine and rich fragrance, outside and in, could in the smallest measure typify the life which was opening

out to her, then was her past experience delusive indeed. Only one chord within her owned the minor key, and that was a faint, intermittent, scarce determinate note. She knew of nothing to strike it, but occasionally it sounded,—like the wind in the pine-trees far off. As she entered the church-porch it had swept over her, and had since returned no longer as an indeterminate whisper, but rather as a suppressed yell from that menacing gargoyle.

‘What hideous beasts those gargoyles are,’ was indeed her first remark as they were walking homewards. Diall laughed. ‘I never seemed to notice them so much before. It is like receiving you at the doorway with a curse.’

‘I hope you didn’t feel it so.’

‘I did really,’ replied she, with a smile.

'I didn't know that I was so superstitious.'

'We must find some means of counter-acting it,' remarked, Diall pleasantly; and led on to another topic.

He kept up a pleasant flow until they were nearing the homestead, and by then Barbara felt only the radiance again. They approached the house by a side way, and entered the farm-yard.

'Now comes my ordeal,' said Roger.
'The other is nothing to it.'

'You must be natural, Roger, and nothing else. He will be facetious. The poor old man has developed the faculty remarkably of late. I wish we could have avoided it. After all, it is barbarous to have inflicted it upon him.'

'I am afraid it is,' assented the other.

They seemed inclined to linger in the

rick-yard, all was so still and warm and fragrant in the sunlight. Nobody was to be seen or heard,—only the fowls chuckling as they raked and pecked around the stone staddles supporting the ricks. Perhaps Barbara hoped that her father might appear, and so help in making the introduction less formal, but in this she was disappointed. Neither he nor anybody else appeared, and only when the two were approaching the door did they hear the conversation which was proceeding in the kitchen. To Barbara it seemed unusually subdued, and she entered rapidly.

‘Is my father in the room, Miriam?’
With the words her heart was troubled.

The girl addressed did not answer, nor any other of the women there assembled.

The carter, whom Barbara was surprised to see there at that hour, at length spoke.

‘Ur yent been about, miss, this marning.’

‘What, isn’t he up yet? Hasn’t he been down at all yet?’

Mrs. Medlicott answered that he had not, and that neither had his blind been drawn up. This had escaped Barbara, as she and her husband had not entered by the front.

‘And has nobody been to see what is the matter?’ exclaimed she, angrily, as she left the room.

Nobody answered. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Medlicott had been, but she reserved her information.

‘What is it, darling?’ asked Diall, anxiously, taking hold of Barbara’s arm as she passed him.

‘Come with me,’ she said, quietly; and they ascended the stairs in company.

It needed not that anybody should tell Barbara what she was going upstairs to discover. Instinctively she felt it. In the sudden retrospect which the shock had inspired in her, she knew that since the previous evening had she felt it. He had submitted to her,—that was cause enough for disquiet. At the door she paused, but Diall clutched her hand firmly, and with the other she turned the handle.

There was a strong light inside the room, for only the thin white blind excluded the full glare of the morning sun. Indeed, an unintercepted ray, passing between the blind and the casement, struck the foot of the bed with one brilliant bar which lay athwart that part of the counterpane

raised up by the sleeper's feet. In the room there seemed a great silence, only broken by the twittering of sparrows on the eaves outside. The two walked up to the bedside, and stood there speechlessly. The old man seemed in peaceful sleep. Diall soon heard the sound of silent tears, and, having taken the old man's hand, perforce mingled his own as silently with them.

Poor old Bezaleel had overslept himself, and knew at last complete submission to the inevitable.

Barbara allowed some tears to fall upon her father's face as she kissed him; then turned away. Diall stooped and did the same, and the two were fully reconciled.

CHAPTER II.

REVIEW.

‘WELL, Edmund, I won’t disguise from you my infinite satisfaction at your resolution,’ said the Rev. Paulinus Rowe to his nephew, as they sat at breakfast in the vicarage amidst the mountains. ‘It will give a zest to life which—pardon me—has I think been hitherto wanting to you. You already look marvellously better than at any time before I remember to have seen you. Don’t you think so, Eleanor?’

‘Wonderfully better, my dear!’ exclaimed the comely middle-aged lady referred to. ‘I can’t help looking at the boy with constant amazement. I didn’t know that the midlands were so healthy. You always speak of that neighbourhood as relaxing, Paul; but this boy seems to have been braced up as much as he ever could have been in this country.’

‘Evidently it depends upon your occupation,’ replied the clergyman, smiling.

‘Uncle Ned, let me be a farmer at your place, will you?’ interposed a boy of fourteen, the youngest of the family and the only one of the children at present at home, he having been kept from school invalided. ‘I am going to be a farmer, you know, and ride about all day. What have you got to shoot there? Are there plenty of grouse?’

‘Don’t be so barbarous, Charlie,’ said the boy’s mother, severely. ‘Your uncle never shoots anything. He doesn’t find pleasure in destroying like you, but tries to do good in the world.’

‘Don’t you shoot, uncle? Then I shan’t come to your place.’ But Rowe winked at the boy, and the latter understood that they should continue the conversation elsewhere.

‘Not grouse, Charlie, at any rate.’

‘Your ethical scheme, as you prefer to call it,’ resumed the reverend gentleman, ‘is, I think, peculiarly valuable. The rural question is evidently coming more and more to the front, and a man like you in an agricultural district, if engaged in the practical work as well, has quite exceptional opportunities. The squires, of course,

have—have other interests and engagements, and can hardly be expected to devote their energies to this kind of work. A day-to-day intercourse with the rustics is, as you say, quite indispensable, if anything solid is to be done. I myself shall watch your progress with peculiar interest, and I hope you will keep me fully informed of your doings.'

' And of course you will come down, uncle, and renew old associations. You would thoroughly enjoy a holiday in the Cotswolds. I can house all of you.'

' By Jove, we'll come——' began the boy, who with difficulty was repressing himself throughout this trying conversation ; but a word from his mother checked his exuberance.

The clergyman proceeded.

‘I once had a day with your father at a place called Stow on the Wold——’

At length Charlie was released, and, to say truth, his uncle also, for Rowe found intercourse with the clergyman and his family more irksome than he would have wished. The only moments of the day in which he could pretend to find the smallest satisfaction were those spent with his impetuous nephew in rambling through the heather, tracing the course of some mountain burn, or climbing to a cairn on some breezy hill-top.

The change, nevertheless, he found of infinite value to him, for from this distance, and amidst this exhilarating atmosphere, he could view the disquieting circumstances, which he had left behind, with something like discriminative effect. Some

of his delusive tendencies he was able to discern, and upon such perception he had written that letter to Barbara. In the train of thought which it had inaugurated, he continued to indulge, and after about a week's pursuit of it he felt the horizon to be considerably cleared.

Perhaps the strangest symptom of advancing health (spiritually, of course; bodily, he never ailed anything,) lay in his vigorous abandonment to moorland delights. He and the boy became enthusiastic companions, with a far fuller sense of genuine companionship than existed between Rowe and the clergyman. The latter ministered too obviously to the emotional in his nephew, and his nephew felt a growing inclination to escape from this. He felt an ever-increasing tendency in the direction

of the physical, and experience prompted him to minister to the requirement.

But, as already said, his ideals were not by any means extinguished, only modified. As he looked from here, all that pastoral country around Murcott, with its lush, sensuous contours and rank fertility of vesture, still appeared in an imaginative halo, which could still incite him to visionary enterprise. Something nearer to the artist's conception of what life might be under those conditions was clearly possible ; his should be the quest for it, and by him should it be at last instituted, say what they would. It would give a noble object to his desolate existence. Rowe was nothing of an individualist. It was not for his own peace and satisfaction that he ordered his tactics, but for the good of the

community. That still must be his aim. If his methods were to savour something more of the practical than hitherto had been the case, still all this was behind them. Nobody must forget the fact.

It was perhaps significant of the phase which he had now arrived at, that these methods were allowed to rest in considerable obscurity. He never attempted in any degree to formulate them. If the thought of this occurred to him, it at once rendered him impatient, and he sought occupation. Here was a clue no doubt to his distaste for his uncle's intercourse. As a practical worker amongst parishioners, and as a manager of the parochial school, the Rev. Paulinus Rowe naturally wished to speak almost exclusively of methods, having a clear impression that upon them

alone rested the solidity of results. He could never bring his nephew nearer than to generalities.

When this stage had been reached, Rowe felt anxiety to depart. He wrote urging Diall to fix a day for his return, and he was restless until the reply came to him. He could not understand the delay, for at the outset they had led him to understand that what they did they should do imminently. It arrived at length, and once more the prospect before him had altered.

He and the boy had been over the moors since earliest morning, they now generally finished their breakfast by half-past five. There had been a pleasant change in the weather, the breathless and cloudless sunshine having been displaced by a stiff

west wind which drove heavy grey clouds over the hills, pelting them occasionally with a refreshing shower. The pair had set off with their rods, but their mood had proved unfavourable to piscatorial exercise. They had soon hidden their possessions under a scarf, and set off rampantly to startle the curlews and the plovers in the most distant and desolate peat bogs.

On these expeditions the boy talked almost incessantly of prospective schemes, but as they savoured never so faintly of ethical methods Rowe was in no danger of being irked by them. Charlie had taken firmly to the idea of being a farmer with his uncle, and never tired of planning for and questioning about the future which shone so brilliantly before him. Rowe favoured the conversation, for he saw no-

thing but satisfaction in the thought that this boy might indeed ultimately be a more mature companion to him.

‘Uncle, it’s a beastly shame you’re going,’ said the boy, as at last they were slowly descending the brae above the house: studies with his father at eleven, the previous two hours being granted, (ostensibly on fine mornings only,) as a concession to the visitor, but as the student was shrewd enough to entice his companion abroad before the state of the weather was generally known to the family, and not to return until it was too late for it to exercise any influence over his movements, for practical purposes eleven was considered to be the appointment. Latterly Rowe had not been seducible beyond it, for about that hour the postman’s horn resounded at

the vicarage gateway when he had anything to leave them, and the visitor lived now in a state of daily expectancy.

‘I may go any day, Charlie. But you shall come down to Murcott next summer.’

‘Oh, yes!’ muttered the boy, expressively.

Rowe looked at his watch.

‘He must have gone. There’s sure to be a letter for me this morning.’

But at that moment a horn sounded a little way off.

‘He’s at the manse,’ cried the boy.
‘Come on; I’ll race you for it. I’ll bet you a penny there isn’t one.’

Off they went down the incline at break-neck speed, the boy ultimately winning by a considerable distance. Just as the mail-

cart drew up at the gate, he came panting up beside it.

‘Edmund Rowe, Esquire,’ said the man, handing out the letter.

‘That all, Robert? Thank you. Good-morning. I say, uncle, it’s come and I’ve lost.’

Rowe snatched the epistle. Yes, it was from Diall; at last—but from Withbridge. He tore it open, and after a hurried perusal looked blank. The boy read his face instantly.

‘Have they burnt your ricks, uncle?’

‘No, poor old Winnett is dead, and was buried yesterday.’ And the two went into the house.

The news came as a violent shock, and caused Rowe genuine distress, for he had formed a kind of attachment to the whim-

sical old countryman. Apart from this, such a sudden interposition of the shades must have caused perturbation to the most callous.

‘What a shocking thing!’ cried the vicar’s lady. ‘You didn’t know he was ill, Edmund, did you?’

‘He wasn’t. It was another stroke, in the night. They found him calmly dead in the morning.’

‘That’s how I should like to die,’ cried Charlie, readily.

‘Charlie, don’t talk so dreadfully,’ replied his mother.

‘Poor old man,’ the clergyman remarked quietly; he had been hitherto silent. ‘There is a certain beauty in such a dissolution; if, my dear boy,’ he proceeded, laying his hand upon his son’s shoulder,

'if the soul is prepared for such an instantaneous change as that of this good old farmer undoubtedly was.'

Rowe had only exhibited to his household the ingenuous and humorous traits in his late friend's character.

'You will want to leave us, Edmund?' then said the vicar.

'Yes, uncle, I will go to-morrow.'

And, for the rest of Rowe's time there, a subdued spirit pervaded the atmosphere of the vicarage.

Rowe himself appeared deeply thoughtful. No doubt he pondered much on the impressive incident, and on the immediate effect it must inevitably have upon his future life at the Pool Farm; but there was more besides this. Diall had made a startling suggestion to him,

and this also demanded grave reflection. In the face of this calamity, Roger proposed, with Rowe's concurrence, that he and his 'wife' (the reader flinched at the word) should remain at the farm until his, Rowe's, arrival. Could he possibly face the pair? He pondered it throughout the day, until it was nearly post-time. Then, with customary impulsiveness, he scribbled a hurried acceptance of Diall's offer, and the letter was sent.

The following day, therefore, Rowe bade farewell to his relatives. By leaving Yardhope at seven o'clock in the morning, and travelling express throughout the day, he could reach Knapstone station shortly after sunset; this he had decided to do. His aunt he embraced the previous night, but the clergyman would for him-

self admit of no such degenerate arrangement. He was not an early riser habitually, it was true, but to speed a parting guest he would have suffered graver inconvenience. He undertook to drive his nephew himself to the station, a distance of five miles, and no persuasion could deter him from the enterprise. Accordingly, at half-past six he emerged from his privacy, and joined the two juniors at their viands. Despite moderate means, the Rev. Paulinus was no ascetic, and the breakfast-table over which he found them did no discredit to a country renowned for its attention to the preliminary engagement of the day. The clergyman's share in it, however, was modest, and in due course they set off. On the return journey, Mr. Rowe spoke earnestly

to his son of the duties and responsibilities of a farmer, but he was unable to shake the boy's faith in the amenities of his chosen calling.

The day's travel was pleasant to Rowe rather than otherwise. He had a short time to spare for a glimpse at the city in York, and again in Worcester, and availed himself of it at both places. It was not until he had left the latter station, upon the final stage of his journey, when the familiar, and to his ear he found peculiarly musical, accents of the midland vernacular began to play about him, that the circumstances awaiting him at his destination found power seriously to assert themselves. Then, in characteristic sort, he began mercilessly to tantalize himself, and not until mere lapse of time forced issues upon

him did he find any measure of peace.

Diall received him with quiet, but expressive hand-clasp. As they drove home-wards they talked of the incident mainly occupying the minds of both of them, in moderated terms, and with an absence of that cordial effusiveness which had always characterized their former intercourse. Nobody affected to be wholly at ease, just as in nobody was absolute constraint made obvious. At the meeting between Rowe and Barbara, you would have adjudged them average friends ; nothing more nor less.

Barbara made no display of her mourning. A black gown she wore, which, with something of an added paleness in her countenance and reserve in her behaviour, seemed only to add to her native dignity.

The ring also, despite a certain adroitness on the wife's part, Rowe very speedily detected. All the details of that acquisition he had yet to learn from other sources.

Later, the three sat talking.

'Stay with us, Barbara,' Diall had said, as the young lady gave hint of withdrawal. 'Don't you think so, Ned?'

'Please; if we are to talk of tactics. Do you inevitably leave to-morrow?'

'Inevitably,' responded Diall.

They sat, and the two men smoked.

The discussion which followed chiefly related to the management of the farm. Despite the obvious limits to his experience, Rowe expressed his determination to carry on the place as heretofore, a course upon which neither of the others naturally

had any opinion to offer. His present staff of men he meant at first to suffice him; all he wanted was the indispensable housekeeper. Here Barbara could offer practical assistance, and named the middle-aged widow of a farmer to whom she was able to speak from personal acquaintance. This seemed to dispose of initial difficulties. The conversation, nevertheless, became protracted, and it was already late when Barbara withdrew.

The two men sat on, and their talk became more personal.

‘Well, Ned, you will think I have done my best to cripple you,’ said Diall, apologetically. ‘Is it to cause a breach in our intercourse?’

‘I hope not,’ replied the other. ‘It is not a thing to be surmounted in a moment,

but I don't pretend that I shall never recover. Why the deuce did you not tell me about it? Surely that was the obvious course, and then any sort of complication would have been avoided.'

'Well, yes, as things have proceeded, of course I ought to have done so; but I feel some little justification, if I can't make my claim to it very plain to you. That poor old man, Ned, confessed a rooted aversion for me; that of course was not everything, but it was the commencement. But for that we should have been married years ago, and disastrous enough, doubtless, would have been the consequences. With delay, however, came experience and reflection, and I got to see what a fool I had made of myself. At a certain age, if you have never been used to an income,

you have a miserable faculty of exaggerating the elasticity of a small one. Well, I was what I may call providentially kicked from that absurdity. Not long thereafter, I got indirectly to know of the unsatisfactory pecuniary conditions here, and I simply thrust a small, regular allowance upon Barbara for the preservation of the establishment. With that I abandoned the attitude of lover, for I didn't wish Barbara to be cut off indefinitely from everything better, and between us there existed a pecuniary barrier which I could foresee no method ever of surmounting. Not, at any rate, within reasonable limits, and I was unwilling that Barbara's youth should be wasted upon any such barren chimera. In all sincerity, when

you came here, I did not consider that there was any tie between us.'

Rowe smoked on, in silent attention.

' You think my behaviour imbecile ?'

asked Diall.

' Far from that ; but at what estimate did you put the power of affection in Barbara ?'

Diall affected to shrug his shoulders indifferently.

' Our temperaments differ, you know. In abstract sentiment I had never unlimited confidence.'

Rowe laughed lightly, but sarcastically.

' The difference is not so radical. You are not such a cynic, Diall, as you pretend to be.'

' Granting that my behaviour in effect

was pure bombast, I still discern a kind of reason in it. I maintain, in fact, that through it I have preserved Barbara's affection, in anything like its original brightness. Ethereal sentiment is not food to so many as you imagine. Supposing, now, I had sustained my original position, written a love-letter a week to her, told her to be brave and look forward, that some day undoubtedly we should at least have the satisfaction of dying together,—supposing all this, do you seriously assert that she or I would have reaped one particle of comfort or courage from the relationship? Should we have continued to love each other with the fervour which the daily possibility of severance had inspired in us?’

‘If either of you has the elements

of true feeling, undoubtedly you would.'

'My dear Ned, you deceive yourself. We like to persuade ourselves that it is as you say; poets have said something about it; but the world of fact is at heart practical,—rigorously, remorselessly, shamelessly practical.'

'Where, then, do you get to?' asked Rowe, more fervently. 'You deny the possibility of any noble feeling in us.'

'By no means; but would shield it from becoming a visionary absurdity by refusing to stretch it too much.'

'Diall, you don't deserve her! You don't deserve any woman.'

'I know it too well, Ned,' said the other, smiling.

'The abomination of it!' cried Rowe. 'The sacrilege! You gross materialists

will betray the world. How would life be possible under such a dispensation ?'

' You will gladly acquiesce in it some day, my dear fellow.'

To be reminded of immaturity, past the period of boyhood, is not exactly soothing, so perhaps Rowe's hissing cloud of smoke was blown forth by indignation. He made no answer, and there was a brief silence.

' Do you still seriously think that the Medlicotts are of use to you ?' at length asked Diall.

' Of use ? What do you mean ? Do you think I shall turn them adrift ?'

' Hardly that ; I only ask out of interest in them. You know the circumstances that have made them our peculiar charge.

I am unwilling that they should be a charge to you, unless justified by purely commercial advantages. My first impulse I have been obliged to abandon,—absolute restitution of capital is beyond me, will in all probability be for ever beyond me, and it would be quixotic to cripple my own life and—and Barbara's in the attempt to attain to it. But the extremity of my services will be always extended to them. You will not misunderstand me, Rowe, if I ask you honestly to let me know if at any time you think a modification of your establishment desirable.'

It was quite within the possible that Rowe did misunderstand the petition, for he fidgetted in his chair, bit his pipe-stem, contracted his eyebrows, and indeed felt

upon the point of being veritably angry. It was not enough then that the man should filch a wife from him, but he must try to defraud him of his taste for philanthropy into the bargain ! As complete disguise he felt to be beyond him, Rowe stared at the speaker with an expression of injury.

‘ Won’t you even allow me that, then, Diall ? ’

‘ Allow you that ? I don’t fathom . . . ’

‘ You forget the part I played in the discovery,—you forget, in fact, what first brought me here. Take this from me, and what earthly interest have I in life ? ’

‘ Oh, I see,’ said Diall, drily ; but he was very far from seeing, and commented inwardly, ‘ The impracticable ! ’

Soon afterwards they parted.

The following day Rowe was left in undisputed mastery of Pool Farm.

CHAPTER III.

FOREARMED.

WHEN thus alone, the proprietor speedily recovered the equanimity which he had discovered on the moorlands, and for the next few weeks all went well at Murecott. The autumn operations gave Rowe ample employment, and, as he had no longer the experience of his old friend Bezaleel behind him, he devoted himself to the work with unaffected zeal. It really seemed as though the measure of determination with

which recent events had inspired him were a sustaining power, and that with it he was opening an altogether new and improved chapter of his life's experience.

That part of his theory which involved the sublimated intercommunion of the sexes was very noticeably abandoned, and in his conduct he showed an unhesitating acceptance of the verdict of more commonplace mortals. Eulalie was in no danger of reviving her short-lived dream, and Miriam had every reason to rest content with her bucolic lover. The girls had properly assumed the place of ordinary dependents in a farm-house. No casual encounters were permitted in order to compare spiritual impressions from the sunset; no disinterested exhortations on behalf of neglected admirers in the moonlight. In fact,

there was every appearance of Edward Rowe being at last, in his twenty-seventh year, on the way to become a rational and useful, if still rather exclusive, member of our mundane society. He attended markets with regularity, subscribed to the County Agricultural Association, condescended to affable intercourse with other of the respectable agriculturists about him, and, what was perhaps more to the point than these, began to write full and hearty reports to his friend Roger Diall of all the progress he was making.

‘I always said that some radical upheaval was necessary for the man,’ Roger would remark with satisfaction to his wife, upon the arrival of such a letter at the Chelsea flat. ‘My underhand treatment of him was nothing short of a providential

arrangement to this end. Don't you think so, Barbara?"

Barbara did think so, and thought also that everything had resolved itself with quiet exemplary, nay, exceptional, benignity.

Again Rowe found his deliverance in action. He plunged with all his old impetuosity into the harvesting operations, and as his crops chanced to be in bountiful proportion, and the skies under which they were being gathered propitious, everything combined to promote exhilaration in him. It is possible that the rebound and (was it?) the removal of Barbara's critical eye, urged him to a more whole-hearted abandonment even than had characterized him through the haytime. Always, save and except. His altered attitude to wo-

men, more especially to those of his own household, remained a matter for universal comment.

He had bought himself another horse, and in the breezy September days he tore madly over the stubble, or along the green margins of the country roads, making no secret of his intention to practise for the approaching hunting season. This form of pleasure began to exercise a powerful fascination over him, exceeding far that which lay in the gun. This latter he indulged in but slightly, considering it to be a more difficult accomplishment, and perhaps lacking the patience for the systematic practice which alone can lead to confidence and efficiency in the manipulation of explosives.

Not the smallest portion of the comment

excited by his altered conduct passed within the precincts of his own abode. Of her free will, Eulalie never spoke of him ; but the more ingenuous Miriam, like the moth and the candle, frequently fluttered around the irresistible brilliance. Still in an artless, unconscious way, though, and to nobody's knowledge but that of her sister. These two always made up the butter, did the æsthetic part of the laundry, and otherwise were thrown frequently together away from general ear-shot. Rowe always averred mentally that he had never throughout his experience had such perfection of shirts and collars to wear as of late months, and perhaps therewith flung a thought at the laundress. It was in the seclusion of the laundry that the chief of Miriam's reflections upon

her master found utterance. In wider fields of civilization there is not the same degree of personal relationship between the producer and the consumer of clean linen as in this instance, else the revelation of reciprocal musings between the two classes would have a very wide interest. As it is, in the intimacy, at any rate of suggestion, inevitable to the one side, curious psychological speculation would seem to be irresistible, were it not so obvious that the limits of our general imagination hardly permit it an existence.

At the Pool Farm, however, much combined to give such indirect intercourse a very definite existence. How could Miriam possibly press her iron over this shirt-front, for instance, without glancing at the wearer? If she could, when all

her art had been expended, and the garment hung to air upon the horse, would such insensibility have been longer possible ?

‘ I can’t think how it is, Lalie,’ said Miriam, innocently, one day upon such occasion ; ‘ I can’t think how it is that I can get-up things so much nicer now than I ever used to. Look at that !’

The girl held out at arm’s length a shirt perfected,—holding it by the two shoulders before her ; a veritable work of art, the perfection of a shirt ; as white and glossy as a swan’s wing, as free from flaw or wrinkle as the forehead of the artist herself.

‘ It is beautiful, Miriam,’ was the whole of the other’s reply.

‘ Ah, I wish he had married Miss Bar-

bara. It would all have been so different.'

Then there was silence, broken only by the thud of Eulalie's iron, and the rustle from her sister straightening another starched article.

'Don't you wish he had, Lalie?'

'Yes.'

A listless affirmation, certainly. Eulalie was different now, in looks and manner alike. She had not abandoned herself to obvious pining,—no symptoms of an approaching 'decline' even had been discernible in her; but a more mature reserve than formerly characterized her in speech and action.

'How she could refuse him for Mr. Diall!' This was a stock exclamation of Miriam's upon such occasions. It came in generally by way of parenthesis, whenever

the overwhelming thought assailed her and clamoured for utterance.

'And I'd such a fright this afternoon,' the girl began again the next moment. 'Luke thinks he'll kill himself some day on that horse. He is venturesome, Lalie. I never saw old Master Winnett ride like he did this afternoon. He passed me in Penyard Lane as I was coming back from the Cottage, and oh, you never did! I climbed over a gate when I saw him coming, for I'm sure he wouldn't have seen me. He never does now, never.'

So they talked on, or at least so Miriam talked, for upon this topic her sister could seldom be induced to exceed monosyllables. Eulalie wondered, and had often wondered, at the other's frankness in this direction, for, once, she had felt suspicion against

Miriam also. If with reason, results must differ very materially.

The opinion of Luke and Miriam only represented one which was widely prevalent in the neighbourhood. The death or disablement of Mr. Rowe would have caused nobody, at any rate, a moment's astonishment, whatever other sensation the calamity might have occasioned. When at length a mitigated form of their expectations was actually realised, the only surprise arose out of the insignificance of the consequences.

Insignificant enough they seemed, judged by mere physical results, and anything beyond these general onlookers had not the means of estimating. It was known, at any rate, at the farm-house, although scarcely noticed, that Miriam had first

brought the news of Rowe's accident in the lane. She had been excited about it,—had urged men instantly to go forth and render the injured one every assistance,—had—— But what of this? Would not any one of Rowe's dependents, nay, any one of his remoter neighbours, have done him the like service?

It was during the first week of October that it happened, late in the afternoon. Twice a week Miriam went to an outlying dependency of the Pool Farm, known as the Cottage, to bring back the eggs that the woman had accumulated there, and it was on her return with the basket that again she had encountered her master upon the occasion of the accident. It was half-past five at the time, so really evening for this season of the year. The day had

been exquisite, and perhaps the girl had not hastened on her journey. Cloudless and hot throughout the afternoon, and she had lingered by the gate of the upland pasture, which faced the west, to gaze idly at the herd of cows gathered in the centre, some lying, some standing listlessly swaying their tails, and musing upon the activity of a flock of starlings swarming in the grass amongst them. The autumn sense of repose was infectious, and, soothed by the general influence, she stayed there longer than she was aware. All the trees were turning rusty, except those which were already a brilliant yellow. Loads of ruddy hips and haws tinted the hedgerows. Rooks were cawing, sheep bleating, and a cock crowing occasionally, whilst the drowsy hum of a threshing-machine in the

distance served as a harmonious accompaniment to all. But the sun dipped and the air grew cooler. There were now no clouds, merely suspicion of faint streaks in the blushing haze of the west and south horizon, underneath the slip of the new moon. The ground-mist crept up at the foot of the hill, most noticeable about the village, and as Miriam at length perceived it she moved. Almost immediately she stopped again, for the deep thud-thud of a horse's hoofs upon the turf alarmed her. The next moment it was visible, yes, upon her side, so without a thought she scrambled over the gate.

A yard or two within the field she stood, and watched the horse like a spectre shoot past the opening. It sped so rapidly that determinate vision it had scarcely been;

nevertheless, a sickening chill came over her, and she ran to the gate. Not only her eyes, but her ears as well misgave her. That light tinkle of metal was more certain than sight, and came not from the hoofs, she knew. It must be the dangling stirrups.

Nobody saw her, so she recked not how she surmounted the gate. Once over, the actual predicament was apparent. The horse had disappeared away to the right, but some yards in the other direction upon the turf lay the prostrate figure of the rider. It was towards this she darted.

Miriam at all times seemed wholly deficient in self-consciousness, so that it was not to be expected of her now. With lips apart and features colourless, she pounced upon the sufferer. Whilst muttering scarce

articulate terms of passionate endearment, she seized a hand and chafed it in her own. Then she pressed it to her lips, to her cheeks, and to her breast; but to all her glow of solicitude and love the man remained insensible. . Seeing this, her tears started, and her passionate words came with redoubled vehemence.

'Do hear me, sir!' she cried, with her lips close to his ear. 'Do look at me! We can't live without you: I'm sure we can't. I shan't live without you! If you're dead I shall die too. I shall . . . I shall . . . '

Her tears covered his face as well as her own, and now she clasped him tightly in her arms as she would have done an infant. Now again she fondled him, entreating him by all the tenderness she knew of

to look at her, to speak to her, once, if only it was to be for once.

Miriam's tactics, innocent as they were of any theory of resuscitation, were at last efficacious. She felt a movement in her arms, and her heart leaped madly. In her ecstasy she renewed her caresses, kissing his face all over and whispering to him. Then he looked at her, and at first smiled. His next look, however, was different, and she shrank into her every-day measure of reserve.

'What are you doing, Miriam?' he said, gruffly. 'Be off at once and fetch a man to help me. Where's the horse?'

She looked, and saw the animal grazing quietly along the road in their direction.

'Aren't you hurt, sir?' the girl asked, staring through her tear-stained eyes at him reclining.

'I shall know, presently. I was stunned, at any rate. But run away to the house, and don't stand staring here.'

Miriam rose with alacrity as she was bidden, fetched her basket of eggs from the gateway, and hurried homewards. His words had not hurt her, her passion was wholly disinterested, and she looked for no passion in return. If he had struck her, she would have scarce thought it unkindness in him. But, when she had turned a corner in the road, she stayed for an instant to bathe her face in the hedge-bottom, and wipe it with her handkerchief; then she ran on.

Despite the informant's assurances, there was intense excitement at the farm. A man and a boy instantly put the pony to the trap and set off. The spot was little more than a mile away, and they had scarcely traversed three parts of the distance, when they met their master, startlingly pale, it is true, but leading, without apparent inconvenience, the peasant steed. He got into the carriage, and the boy brought on the horse.

The slightness of the ill effects was matter of universal gossip. Slight, however, as they were, they seemed to serve Rowe as a warning. He did not immediately renew his equestrian vagaries, and, when in the mood for sport, fell back upon the more meditative form of explosives. Partridges were rife, and by means of a

plentiful charge, he *had* succeeded in bringing down one or two from the larger coveys.

Although Rowe's attitude to life had been of late so much altered, and although in general intercourse he was affable towards his agricultural and other neighbours, for particular acquaintance he had shown little taste. Despite his propagandist tendencies, he seemed unwilling to cultivate the friendship of the genial rector who, from the outset, had offered him all facilities for the enterprise. He remained very much a solitary man, and, even in his sport, preferred to wander over his fields gun in hand alone, to sharing it with any congenial acquaintance. Naturally, he was invited to a day's shooting here and there by the farmers to whom such right

appertained, but he had never been known to accept a single invitation, and had never issued one himself in return. Some plausible excuse was invariably proffered.

When he roamed his fields therefore in solitude, some matter for reflection must inevitably engage him. Often enough it was mere bullocks, for he in practice admitted the engrossing nature of these topics ; but at other times it would be subjects more abstract. So now, frequently, since his accident.

How much or how little of the whole of Miriam's conduct he had been conscious of, could not be gauged by him. That she had kissed him, for instance, he only dimly suspected ; that she had embraced him tenderly, whispered affectionate words to him, he knew. The knowledge had

caused him very much more speculation, nay, at first perturbation, than the accident.

In his inmost soul, Rowe was of what, morally, we have agreed to call upright principles,—strictly and conscientiously puritan. His affection for Barbara, and the development which the issue of it had effected, had, at least, rendered one thing plainer to him, which, in former days, had not been by any means so obvious. He now unhesitatingly admitted that marriage with either of the Medlicott girls, or with any other of a similar species, however fascinating they might prove themselves in person, was a consummation to be avoided. Here surely was an enormous and unexpected flaw in the theory ; and was it not in the very foundation stone of the edifice ?

But he recognized this was, and his conduct ordered accordingly. They had proved themselves incapable of appreciating theoretic behaviour, and there was no middle course.

Miriam's conduct, after troubling him, became ultimately a source of annoyance, and in his solitary musings he nursed an incipient resentment against her. If she had felt ever so kindly towards him, supposing he had been dead, she, situated as she was, had no right to have behaved to him thus. It was not delicate ; it was not womanly in her : whilst towards him living it was criminal.

It followed, therefore, that his behaviour towards this girl became more and more clearly defined. He became positively brusque in his treatment of her,—even

once thought of Diall's suggestion as to a modification of the household. But no, this latter was instantly rejected. It might be taken for an admission of weakness, and that of course was obviously absurd. Moreover, it was unnecessarily harsh, for the girl was in an exceptional state of content. His adopted course was enough, if resolutely adhered to.

The girl breathed no word of her indiscretion ; for such, in the calm of after reflection, she came to regard her conduct ; not even to her sister. He evidently had not approved of it, and that was quite enough to inspire a wish that it had never happened. She must endeavour to work it into forgetfulness ; but those merciless shirts !

Nor indeed shirts only, for numerous

incidents conspired to refresh in her the memory of her master's existence and personality. If she ran into anybody on the staircase, he inevitably it must be. If there was only one in the kitchen when he came in requiring anything, she must be the unfortunate one. These seemed every-day occurrences ; others of a more casual nature there were, which were more embarrassing still, in the bringing about of which fate seemed to display a distinctly malicious pleasure.

The most significant of all, perhaps, was that dark and howling night when Rowe reached home from Knapstone about seven o'clock. The wind whistled and shrieked through the trees, and around the house and buildings, as he drove up to the yard, and he grinned with peculiar pleasure at

the turmoil that raged about him. He had had an adventurous drive, for, expecting to be home long before dark, he had forgotten the lamps, and ere he had gone three parts of his journey, the sullen, overclouded twilight had rapidly sunk into the blackest night. In such conditions he still found an abnormal delight, and upon his arrival he was in a state of singular elation from his contest with the elements.

As he led the horse into the yard and the gate slammed behind him, he saw at a little distance a lantern moving towards the house. He yelled for the light to be brought to him, and instantly it stopped, then advanced towards him.

There was an outer wash-house in the farm-yard, in which, for farm purposes, a boiler was kept constantly heated, so that

it frequently happened that one or other of the girls would fetch hot water from it for use in the kitchen. Such had been the errand of the bearer of the light on this occasion, when interrupted by the master. The figure was invisible, but, by the dim rays which issued from the sides of the dangling lantern, skirts and an apron were visible.

‘Hold it up a bit,’ said Rowe, without further scrutiny, and busying himself with the buckles.

The light was carefully poised so as to throw its ray exactly upon his fingers wherever they moved, and speedily the shafts were out and laid to the ground. Rowe walked off with the pony in what he knew to be the direction of the stable, just saying,

‘ Bring me the light on, will you ? I sha’n’t be a minute.’

The figure moved obediently forward, getting in advance so as to display the stable-door, but with the lantern still so low that nothing of her upper part was visible. The rays which shot from the air-holes at the top rose widening into the darkness, but encountered nothing. Neither spoke.

Rowe took off the harness and hung it up ; then led the pony in, and attended to him, throughout all his movements effectually illuminated by such light as the lantern afforded. When he had finished it, he said ‘ There !’ and turned away. The lantern was rather suddenly lowered as he walked towards the door.

‘Who is it?’ he asked, whilst fumbling with the key.

‘Me, sir,’ was the meek reply.

‘And who is me?’

‘Miriam, sir.’

‘Oh; why did you come?’ he asked, more roughly.

‘You called for the light, sir.’

‘Of course I did; I know that. I mean, why were you out with the light?’

‘To fetch some hot water, sir.’

‘It’s not your duty to be fetching and carrying hot water, is it? I thought it was Anne’s.’

‘Any of us fetch it, sir. Anne was busy.’

‘Now, tell me, Miriam,’ he proceeded, sternly, ‘tell me why you came out just at this moment to-night?’

‘For the water, sir,’ she said, with a note of alarm. ‘Only for the water.’

‘Only for the water. It was singular that you should want the water at this particular moment, and—that *you* should fetch it, do you see?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The poor girl did not at all see anything of the sort. His sarcasm was of course wholly lost on her.

‘If you know *that*, then, you know that—well, in plain English, that you are telling me a lie.’

‘Oh, no, sir, I’m not; I’m sure I’m not.’

‘Do you mean to tell me, girl, that you came out for nothing at all but for the water?’

He spoke earnestly, pointedly, and as

he spoke he lifted her hand which held the lantern until both their faces were illuminated by it; then he looked closely at her. He saw that a tear glistened between each pair of eyelashes, and that her lips were uncertain, but he felt no mercy.

‘Do you mean to tell me that, I say?’

The girl was getting so confused and troubled that she hardly knew what she said.

‘I only came for the water, sir, I’m sure.’

‘Then, Miriam, after—you know what—’ the lantern was still upraised, her tears fell; his features were set in a fixed and glaring scrutiny of her, ‘I must tell you that I don’t believe you. You came out to see me. You knew that I was coming

at that moment to the yard, and you came out only to see me. It is not what a good and modest girl would do. You follow me with your eyes, and you dog my steps upon every possible occasion, and I won't put up with it. I hope this is enough. Go in now, and remember what I have said.'

He allowed her arm to fall, as indeed it did listlessly enough, to her side. Fortunately she had not understood half his words, still less his insinuations, but she had understood enough, and she knew that it was very terrible. Then he strode away to the house.

CHAPTER IV.

WHITHER?

THE apples had lain for some time in huge heaps in the orchard to be pecked at by the birds and silvered by the morning frosts, when at length the order was given to shovel them into the waggons. William Agg and George Lyddiatt did it, with a robin to watch them eagerly from a bough above, and to celebrate in snatches of cheery song the notable employment.

There is something exhilarating, even

to the torpidity of the midland pastoral, in the preparations for the cider press. Blithe it can hardly be, but the fragrant suggestions which float upon the autumn breezes (of potations however cold and thin to the average palate) can evoke a kind of lumbering jocosity quite distinct from the mere animal buffoonery of the yearly wake. The mere shovelling up of fruit affords an inspiring and liberal suggestion, and may be able to impart its note of greater refinement to the operations succeeding. Rowe fully shared the feeling, nay, possibly surpassed it, for to him it all came with the enravishing sense of novelty. He was not content with giving orders, he himself plunged heart and soul into the necessary preparations. Like the new broom proverbially, he showed revolutionary

anxiety for cleanliness, to the ponderous amusement of his subordinates. From twelve months' disuse, the cider-mill naturally accumulated a considerable amount of dirt, and, seeing that the product of his labours was for absorption in the human frame, Rowe felt dainty solicitude on its behalf. At first he had given strict injunctions for it to be scrupulously cleansed ; but there are varying degrees of scrupulosity. Perhaps the master's were superlative. When he saw how his orders had been carried out, he clamoured loudly for brushes and water and himself set resolutely to the task.

The great circular stone trench in which the apples were to be crunched was again swilled and re-swilled, scrubbed and re-scrubbed, until the positive stone itself

became apparent. Similarly the upright millstone was deluged and scrubbed from head to foot. The press in the corner and its tank beneath received attention in their turn. The amusement, perhaps, reached its height when he ordered everyone of the mats which were to enfold the ‘must’ to be brought to him at the pump, and he saturated them in turn. All this accomplished, he felt virtuously content.

The following morning all were ready. The old grey mare stood harnessed with her chest to the bar, which she had to push before her and so turn the stone. The latter, kept firm and upright by a horizontal beam fixed in its centre, and attached at the other end by a pivot to the middle frame of the machine, looked grimly resolute for the fray. All hands were idle,

for the master had not yet come ; but tongues soberly wagged.

‘ Quite a tidy man ur were, Will’am, until the drinking took place, and then, bless ’ee, ur seemed to be at a continual difference. No peace with un whatever.’

‘ Ne’er a bit, Gearge. But ur was quite a hand at the fiddling, drunk or sober.’

‘ Quite, that ur were. Ur always minded me,—in that respect, however,—of old Samuel Such. What a man for the fiddling ! You’ll mind he, Will’am, eh ?’

‘ Should think I do, Gearge. A curious remarkable man,—such strange notions as ur had. Ur mended umbrellas at one time, and I shall never forget a story as old Susan Biddle told I,—her as lived on the Withbridge road yonder. Her was but middlin’ off at last, and one day old Samuel

called in the way of his trade. “ ‘Eess, Samuel,” her says, “ I have a umberella as do want mending shocking, but I’ve ne’er a penny to pay you. But it ull be better wi’ me after a bit,” her said, just like that, —meaning up aloft, o’ course. What ’st think as he answered? “ Give me my good things now,” says he, “ for I dun’t believe in no hereafter.” Sure enough ur did. And look ’ee, Gearge, I asked un solidly one day, “ Samuel, dun’t ’ee really believe then as there be no God?” Ur stood still, quite. “ Will’am,” ur says, “ I can’t say that, my knowledge of astronomy do show me as there must be a Supreme Being. But,” ur said, “ ur’ll take no heed of I. When I’m dead I’m done for. I ’unt believe in no devil till I see un.” “ Then it ull be too late,

I count," said I, but ur didn't speak.'

' Ay, ay, Will'am, that be just the item.
Ur was a desperd——'

This serious pair was here interrupted by Rowe's entrance, and there was a general movement, so their talk ceased.

' Yes, tipple them in, Tom,' cried the master, cheerily, and the hamperful of apples rolled into the trough.

This was the signal for a general commencement. The heap of apples was spread round the groove, more were tumbled in, general hubbub urged the horse to put forth his strength, and the great millstone began to move. Crunch, crunch, went the fruit beneath the ponderous load, and out spurted the juice. Rowe watched with intensest interest, trying to recognise individual apples amongst the crushed

stars which the stone left behind it. More apples were flung in, and the horse went round and round.

When the fruit was considered to have attained to a proper consistency of foaming pulp, one of the men shovelled it into a bucket and emptied it upon the open mat which lay on the bottom slab of the yawning press. When he had put enough, he closed it up, by drawing over each corner of the mat to the centre, then flung another down upon it in readiness for more. So they went on, until the heap in the press was thought to be enough.

Rowe continued enthusiastic. It would be difficult to say what amount of imaginative energy he put into the occupation. All his surroundings were idealized. Historical and poetical associations

(applicable originally, no doubt, to the wine-press, but it was all the same) thronged his brain ceaselessly, and he was not shy of imparting them. He would occasionally stand apart, watching the proceedings as a picture, and descant upon its pleasing suggestions to the silent and the grinning rustics, as they went about the work. A mug lay on the edge of the press for such as felt hardy enough to taste the fresh liquor, and, finding it sweet and palatable, Rowe, in his exhilaration, frequently applied himself, until William Agg, perhaps out of the solicitude of personal devotion, gave him such a list of alarming precedents upon the practice that he was compelled to refrain.

But his good spirits did not abate for all that. For a change he led William on

to narrate in smallest detail, and with every embellishment of characteristic digression, all the tragical histories he referred to. This found universal favour, and it was still in progress when the hour for the mid-day meal arrived.

When the press was tightened, and the men, for the time, gone, Rowe still lingered in the juice-oppressed atmosphere of the mill to mature some of his reflections. In fact, when alone, he drew a book from his pocket and wrote in it, looking around from time to time in doing so. A genial smile played about his features, and he even muttered audibly,

‘ Yes, it is good ; it is the thing after all,—the very thing.’

Then he walked over to the corner by the press, a shaded corner, and examined

something there. It was whilst doing this that he became aware of something crossing the light from the doorway. Then he heard a well-known sound, and called,

‘Eulalie, is that you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ came from just outside.

‘Come in, there’s nobody here. Were you coming to look?’

The girl’s heart perhaps gave an extra beat at this surprising graciousness, but she at once checked it. The fact, though, that he had never spoken like this since Miss Barbara’s departure was not to be ignored.

‘Yes, sir. I didn’t know that you were here.’

‘What on earth does that matter?’

He shut up his book, and put it back into his pocket: then came forward from his obscure corner.

‘ You have often seen them make the cider, I suppose?’

‘ No, sir, never before.’

‘ What, you have never had the curiosity to come down! What people you rustics are!’

Eulalie did not feel affronted, but it did flash across her mind that never before had he classed her thus. There seemed some depreciation in the tone, whereas formerly her extraction had been her greatest virtue.

‘ You must take it, then. A drop won’t hurt you.’

Speaking, he dipped the mug into the tank, and held it out, dripping, towards her. She muttered thanks and took it.

‘ Has Miriam ever seen it?’ he said, as she sipped. ‘ Not? Then I’ll bet she’s

dying to. Fetch her here. She would rather come whilst the men are away.'

In obedience the girl departed, still wondering greatly, and in a minute or two returned with her sister.

Contrary to her wont, Miriam was now the shyer of the two. She had not done pondering that terrible interview scarce past a week. To her also he handed the cup.

' You must taste it, Miriam.'

She took it, and drank.

Then Rowe launched into a brief disquisition upon the spectacle before them, simply and affably. The two girls listened with timid, unacknowledged pleasure, their memories flying back perforce, perhaps, to the sunlit orchard blossom of the spring. Through all the details of the

process he went, step by step ; incorporating a poetical reference here, a mild joke there, in the most unconstrained and natural manner in the world. When at length he reached the trough sunk into the ground, into which the juice was trickling from the press, he again dipped the cup, and held it towards them.

‘More?’

Eulalie took it and sipped ; handed it on to her sister, who took it and drank.

‘Now I must be off to dinner. Is it ready?’

They answered in the affirmative, and instantly he was half-way across the yard before them. Seeing him disappear, they lingered.

‘Come in again, Lalie, for a minute,’ said Miriam ; so they re-entered the mill.

For a few seconds they stared about in silence, then again it was the elder who spoke.

' I thought he would never be like that again. Isn't it nice ? '

' Yes ; ' but the tone was different.

' You don't mean what you say, Lalie. Don't you like him to speak to you ? '

' Oh, yes, I do.'

But Miriam was unconvinced, so she said no more. In a minute or two they returned to the house.

Rowe sat devouring his meal alone. For the sake of company he generally shared it with his housekeeper, but his hour was irregular to-day, and she was busy elsewhere. Yes, he was elate again, and he complacently recognized the fact. Like Miriam, he too had thought much of that

night encounter, reconsidering his behaviour. He had honestly meant it, of that of course there was no doubt, but perhaps after all it was unnecessarily severe. His attitude must be perfectly clear now to everybody concerned, and, that established, he very much preferred a footing of easy geniality to this late one of suspicion and censure. He might reasonably relax now, without falling into any of his former blunders, or leading anybody else to fall into them. He went out again humming a tune, a fact which Miriam in the kitchen noted.

The master was already waiting when the men returned, for his unaided strength had proved insufficient to unscrew the press. Two men, with the leverage afforded by a long pole, eventually suc-

ceeded, and mat after mat was emptied of its exhausted contents, the whilom green and golden apples ‘mushed’ into dry, brown solid cakes, and imprinted with the grain of mats which had enfolded them, and closely resembling indeed the oilcakes which fed the cattle. This ‘must’ was temporarily thrown outside, and there the fowls congregated to peck it over.

The afternoon passed as pleasantly as the morning, and, when at length the early darkness brought their labours to a close, Rowe confessed to himself that he had not before known such a day’s content under the new régime.

The cider days passed, but the pungent aroma which the occupation had occasioned clung for a long time afterwards about the

place, and perhaps this played some part in keeping alive Rowe's altered mood, the birth of which was certainly contemporaneous with that of the original odour, and had no doubt become associated with it. Although the mood continued, upon more mature consideration, he permitted himself very slight change in practical behaviour. However, to certain stages of observation very slight change is speedily visible, and so in this case. Rowe might easily persuade himself that the modification was mainly in himself, that it was for the benefit of his own soul that he permitted the entrance of the more genial suggestions, and that for possible reasons nobody else need have any special knowledge of the change; but, despite the

easiness of the persuasion, it by no means followed that its limitations were strictly accurate in fact.

Since that remarkable culmination of his behaviour towards her, Miriam had watched Rowe closely,—and, it may be added, Eulalie also had watched them both. Ignorant of the subtle workings of such a complex temperament as was that of Rowe, the simple girl had been inordinately startled by his violent attack. How should she know that three parts of his sudden wrath had been in reality addressed to instincts of his own ?

Miriam knew little or nothing of him, little or nothing of herself as regarded him. Eulalie was beginning to feel that she knew and understood something of both, and the change in Rowe's behaviour

vaguely dissatisfied her. She did not affect to discern anything definite, but generalities oppressed her. Upon generalities she herself had built, and with perceptible consequences; it was perhaps not surprising if she viewed them jealously on behalf of another whom she tenderly loved.

It was just her sister's ingenuousness that alarmed her. Her simplicity was appalling. Every movement of Miriam's feelings could Eulalie discern, and doubtless so could others. Sorrowfully, it is true, with a depth of sorrow that was tragic, the sensitive little cripple had to admit to herself that she could no longer trust Rowe. Evidently he was—like other men. The two perceptions, even apart, distressed her; but what when they were juxtaposed?

Action did not come easily to this girl. She could not persuade herself how it were best to do a thing. Talk of Rowe suggestively, significantly? She had done it a hundred times. And yet, more strongly than ever, she felt that the danger was not removed. The only other course was to see Miriam married to Limbrick. This, in such roundabout way as was possible, she had tried for, but the assurance she had received was definite, Luke could not see his way to marriage until the following Michaelmas at soonest. Here then lay no escape.

‘Why *do* you think so much of Mr. Rowe?’ asked Eulalie, plainly, one day when the laundry had wrought its accustomed influence. There was something like

impatience in the tone, so Miriam thought.

'Think of him!' exclaimed the other.
'I think of him because I like him. Don't
you, Lalie?'

'Then you ought not to, Miriam. It
does not matter how you think of him,
and I know you think nothing wrong;
still you ought not to think of him at all,
as you are engaged to another man.'

At the instant the words of Rowe him-
self flashed again upon Miriam, and she
felt frightened.

'But I don't think of him in the way
of marriage,' pleaded she.

'No, of course you don't; but you
ought to try not to think of him at all.
No more than you think of any other man
in the village.'

Miriam said little in reply, and for some time there was silence.

It not unfrequently happens that the result of a piece of action is directly the opposite of what we intended it. Miriam saw that her sister was displeased, therefore she talked very much less about Rowe to her than formerly ; but it is quite possible that by reason of that she thought very much more about him. If not more in mere measurement of moments, certainly so in the character of her thinking. But she did not speak of him, therefore Eulalie hoped that the words had done service. It was not long before she was obliged to doubt even this conclusion.

Such little difference of behaviour as Rowe permitted himself had been instantly detected by Miriam, and upon it she had ceased so

scrupulously to avoid him. Once or twice of late he had chanced to pass her in the rick-yard when she was gathering the eggs in the afternoon, and each time he had called out something to her as he went by. What number to-day? Had she been in so and so? Don't forget so and so. But he never stopped.

One evening when she was out so, it was later than usual and already dusk, she was on the point of entering a cart-shed, a favourite laying-spot of several fowls, when she saw the well-known figure crossing over from the gate. It was most likely that he had not seen her, for the background shaded her, so she disappeared behind the cart. But as she leaned to pick up the eggs she could see under it, and he was there.

‘Is that you, Miriam?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You are very late. You can’t see properly, can you?’

Miriam thought she could just see. Instead of passing on, he stepped to the cart shaft. Presently she came round. He fumbled in his pocket: turned away and took three strides, but was instantly back again.

‘Miriam,’ he said, impetuously. ‘I have been wanting to beg your pardon for the —gross insult I offered you that night. You know what I mean. Will you forgive me?’

‘It—it was only a mistake, sir. It is nothing for me to forgive.’

‘It is,—very much. Just say that you forgive me. I want to hear it.’ There

was haste and apparent tremulousness of utterance.

She said the words, and then he placed his hand upon her arm.

‘Do you remember, Miriam, when I fell from my horse? What did you do to me? I wish to know.’

The girl started with fright, and he could feel her tremble.

‘What did you do?’ he repeated, in a low tone, thrusting his face towards her ear.

‘I can’t tell you, sir. It was wrong of me to do it. I didn’t know what I was doing.’

‘Wrong of you—it wasn’t wrong if—but tell me, what did you do?’

She was silent.

‘Did you kiss me? Yes, I felt the kisses, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, sir, I kissed you.’

‘And what else? Did you put your arms round me, tightly? Did you, Miriam?’

‘Ye-es, sir.’

‘Why did you do it? I must know that.’

‘I don’t know,’ faltered the girl.

‘Tell me, Miriam; I am not angry now.’

‘I don’t know, sir; really, I don’t know. Something made me do it.’

His hand was still upon her arm, and he seemed about to make a further movement; but of a sudden checked himself. His fingers gripped her arm convulsively, mercilessly. So savagely that she uttered a little ‘Oh!’

‘You silly girl! Get in, Miriam, at once.’

As he spoke he had flung her arm away, and then he paced out into the yard. He had not gone three yards when he encountered Eulalie, but he passed her by in silence. Just past, he heard her call out ‘Miriam!’ and the other answered.

The following morning, Rowe announced to his housekeeper that he had to leave home for two or three days. He gave no cause for his departure, and none, of course, was asked for. After a few words with his head carter, he drove to Withbridge station, and the boy returned with the trap.

CHAPTER V.

BARBARA'S VISION.

THE quietude of Barbara's room here seemed to equal that of the parlour in the old farm-house. The traffic in the road below was so intermittent, and by distance was rendered so indeterminate, that if she closed her eyes for a moment she could at once fancy it to be the familiar note of some implement of tillage going afield; the horse-roller, perhaps, rumbling past the gateway to do its work

on the bright green spears of wheat amidst which the skylarks flitted ; or the harrow rattling over the stones on its way to the rich brown fragrant furrow. And Barbara, be it known, did so close her eyes, sometimes, and turned not away in scorn from the picture which the reminiscence so vividly presented.

The room was, in its main characteristics, the same as when we saw her bachelor lord entertain his friend with tea and sardines, and when the latter, it may be remembered, commented on a certain tea-cosy worked in plush. Rowe had never fully trusted Diall since that evening,—trusted him, that is, as regarded the workers of tea-cosies in plush. His suspicions had since been amply justified, no doubt, but all that was with the past.

The long-suffering Andrea looked down from the wall as of old, and had enthralled this additional beholder in a homage surpassing in intensity that of his original disciple. The other pictures,—with the addition of a long, light oak frame containing three photographs of the Pool Farm, Murcott,—were the same, and the books ; but the intangible something pronounced that no longer a bachelor dwelt here. It is true that a piano was added, across the corner by the window, but although it seriously diminished the space it could not make the whole of the difference. Not from that only could spring the subtle effluence which the interior exhaled, and which appealed so forcibly to the two or three male visitors that Diall could boast. Perhaps the flower-pots

helped to do it,—or the cut blossoms in dainty vases which appeared in unexpected corners,—or the grasses tied up with æsthetic silk handkerchieves,—or the this, or that equally simple and insignificant innovation. Whatever it was, a difference was perceptible, and to nobody more flagrantly than to the whilom bachelor himself.

Life went very glowingly in this modest Chelsea flat at present. Perhaps it was because of neither of the inmates having been pledged to any very definite matrimonial ideals that the reality proved so extravagantly satisfying to them. Diall was never much amiss in physical appearances; but, as regarded Barbara, the maligned metropolitan atmosphere had worked already a remarkable transforma-

tion. The spare cheeks of dairy days were more amply rounded now, and owned a delicacy of colour which the Cotswold breezes had endeavoured to impart in vain. She knew an elasticity of spirits which she had but vaguely suspected before. She had been thrown at mature age into a world of marvellous enchantment, of which practically she had known scarcely anything before, but of which all the former experiences of her life had gone to form an accurate index. In the pardonable exuberance of the moment, she glanced at the display around her and felt that what of her life remained to her was to be spent in amplifying this index into an intimate acquaintance with the contents of all the pages to which it referred. Wisely, Barbara set off upon her voyage

leisurely, but with an engrossing zeal which weariness or discouragement could not assail. Valiant Barbara! 'Well may she speed and fairly finish her intent!'

The clock upon the mantel-piece struck eleven, and Barbara raised her eyes from her book to regard the face of the time-piece. At first abruptly, scarce consciously, but with gathering precision, and by the time the vibration of the strokes had ceased she got up and closed the volume. There were sounds in an adjoining room, proceeding doubtless from some simulated form of labour, for a resident servant Barbara did not boast at present. (The whole residential question was at this time under domestic discussion.) The young lady smiled and shook her head. Then she put her volume on the top of a short book-case

by the side of a terra-cotta statuette representing Thorwaldsen's Hebe, and took up instead a bookseller's catalogue. She turned to a certain page, evidently already in her mind, bent the catalogue inside out, and thrust it in her pocket. After this she disappeared from the room, reappearing in a few minutes clad for a journey. Some words were exchanged with the dependent, and the housewife went out.

Barbara could not as yet contentedly exchange the liberal spectacle of the London pavements for the confined area of an omnibus interior, therefore daily she walked what even her husband proclaimed to be extravagant distances. Now, for instance, she set forth from her doorway in Chelsea with an absolutely light heart, —that indeed is but a poor and ineffectual

characterization of the sensation she experienced,—set forth, I say, with the calmest deliberation upon a journey to Euston Road. A Londoner, no doubt, would as soon think of setting off for a morning's walk to Edinburgh; and an average countryman (to say nothing of countrywoman) of but a few months acquaintance with the town would in all probability never think of it at all. Certainly not, if, as chanced to be the case with Barbara, he had never wittingly been in the Euston Road before. But Barbara had been to the Museum and to Tottenham Court Road, and she could concatenate accordingly.

Unique amongst her sex, Barbara could appreciate the abstruse complexities of a map. No inconsiderate abandonment of

hope befel her as she regarded the intricate delineation of streets, roads, parish boundaries, or the like, upon the paper. She had an absolute fondness for such, and Diall was frequently amazed at the intimate acquaintance which his wife displayed with parts of the town which to his knowledge she had never as yet visited. In fact, it was often turned into part of their amusement (or had been at the outset, for Diall had long been forced to recognize that he knew little more of the highways or even byways of the metropolis than did his rustic Barbara,)—it was often allotted to the wife to lead the pair, by the way which she would take, to any point they were desirous of reaching.

In a walk to Euston Road, therefore, there was hardly likely to be anything

alarming, and weariness from mere street perambulating, Barbara would but on rarest occasion confess to. She had no necessity to be at home till, at any rate, half-past four, so that she planned a liberal circuit. She reached Piccadilly with moderate directness; Regent Street delayed her, and Oxford Street no less, for she went the length of it to the foot of Tottenham Court Road. Even to the charms of 'artistic' furniture Barbara was not indifferent, so that the latter part of her journey was made but slowly.

At length she found herself in the desired locality, and by investigation of shop headings found further that the number she was in search of was very near at hand. In fact, before proceeding many paces, she saw ahead the signal that she

sought, for Roger Diall had, as it were, instantly communicated to her his own eagle eye for a bibliopolist's repository. She lingered to glance over the books displayed, then entered the shop.

Barbara produced the catalogue, and pointed out her want—only a book of local ballads—was it unsold? It was, and speedily produced. Five shillings were exchanged, and the wife went off in triumph.

For refreshment, a bun and a glass of milk sufficed,—frequently this constituted the whole of her mid-day meal; she partook of high tea with her husband at six. As she sat in the shop, she examined her recent purchase, and in due course went on her way again.

It was not possible for Barbara to be

in this part of the town without visiting the British Museum, so thither she repaired. Perhaps she felt just a little tired, or at any rate inclined for a greater repose of scene. Roger had, upon her first arrival, obtained his wife a reader's ticket for the library here, and, long since, she had been initiated into the mysteries of the reading-room; but to-day she was bent upon more general things. She turned into the sculpture department, and lingered amongst the busts of the Roman emperors. At length, passing on to the statuary beyond, she stopped suddenly beside the Minerva, and glanced after a figure that had, perhaps hastily, passed her. Not fully satisfied, she turned her steps, and, upon coming to the entrance-hall, saw the same figure, with as it

seemed the same impulsiveness of movement, making for the reading-room. Curiosity was so strong in her, that instantly she followed ; but, upon entering the solemn calm which reigned beneath the spacious dome, the figure was lost to her. Here and there she gazed, but saw nobody recognizable.

For a minute or two she paused, turning to look idly at the topographical shelves beside her. When that was done, she went off to the seat marked A, and so laboured conscientiously through the alphabet, examining every individual seated, and every casual stander-by that she encountered, until the whole circuit of the room had been made. Similarly the catalogue desks, but all without effect. Her eye must have deceived her. Nobody of

her acquaintance did that room contain.

Barbara was amused at her own perversity. Despite such unassailable conclusion, she would not acquiesce in it. She took possession of a seat, got down some books, and rested awhile. Then once more she traversed the vast area. Thus, in alternate rest and wandering, she spent the afternoon there, rebellious constantly against what her reason assured her must be the case,—that her eyes had conveyed to her an erroneous impression.

This incident caused her so much delay that she was obliged to ride home in order to be there in time to make preparations for her husband. They were to go to the Lyceum that night to see ‘*Much Ado About Nothing*,’ and neither would feel any tolerance for being late. Fortunately

she got home first, and was engaged in culinary duties when her husband found her. He had entered the sitting-room first, and seen the volume exposed there. As he came into the kitchen he brandished it fiercely.

‘Barbara, you will ruin me. This is the very volume that I said I must not have. I have overdrawn this month’s library-fund already.’

‘It is not out of the library-fund,’ replied Barbara, busy with something fragrant at the gas-stove.

‘What is it out of, then? Your dinner-fund? I won’t have it, wife, I tell you again. I will not have it.’

He clutched her from behind, beneath the arms, with a view no doubt to administer exemplary chastisement.

'Be off,' she said, as soon as she was able.
'It will all be ready in five minutes.'

So the man went off, whistling, to dress.

When presently they were sitting together at the table, the pleasantry began again.

'You walked all the way! You only do it to defraud me. You've appropriated the fares, I'll bet. And what about cobblers' bills?'

'I rode back; because I stayed too long at the Museum.'

'What abstruse investigation detained you?'

'More abstruse a one than you imagine. Do you believe in visions?'

'I should think I do. I have seen you sitting where you are now, and as plainly as you are now, any time during these last

ten years, when to my certain knowledge
you were many a mile away.'

'Shallow, shallow ; a better instance.'

'I have beheld, then, vast areas of
books—'

'Pooh, pooh ! But without joking,
dear, my eye or my mind beheld this
day, within the building known as the
British Museum, the walking image of
your friend, Mr. Edmund Rowe.'

Diall gave forth a round volley of
laughter.

'Laugh as you will. I knew you
would. But more, I am perfectly con-
vinced that the image was consciously
fleeing from me.'

'I should think you are,' roared Roger.

'What else could it do ?'

Despite all his jeering, Barbara gave a

minute account of the experience, and her husband listened civilly.

'It is strange, darling, that you should have been deceived so, for you are not hysterically inclined, and certainly Rowe is not like everybody. Couldn't you construe anybody in the room into your spectral fugitive?'

'There was nobody remotely resembling him. I was only too ready to clutch at the most distant likeness, but nobody would allow me to. I wanted also to believe it a delusion, but I couldn't.'

'Well, I'll write and ask him if—'

'But that won't do; for, if it were he, certainly he was making a point of eluding me, and of course he could hardly confess to it. I will write to one of the girls. I can put it indirectly.'

So it was settled, and they spoke of their prospective entertainment of the evening.

An evening at the theatre still afforded Barbara much of the tremulous delight incident to childhood rather than to maturer age, as well as the intellectual satisfaction which her activity of mind invited. This they felt rather a special occasion, and Diall had, some time previously, secured front seats in the dress-circle to celebrate it. He was not habitually so extravagant. Although by no means in full dress, Barbara looked beautiful and happy as she surveyed the house from her throne of velvet, and Diall envied no man. Indeed he considered, by comparison with anything around him, that he had only cause for pride inordinate, and that, if

envy entered at all into the situation, it was only in connection with the attitude of others towards himself. The young wife had coiled quite simply her dark, abundant hair into an ample crown, and from beneath the folds of this natural adornment, shot her restless, intelligent gaze upon all that was about her. Her cloak she had thrown back, and displayed a fascinating terra-cotta gown beneath, which did not clasp too niggardly the swan-white throat which it was its privilege to adorn.

In her behaviour, she always displayed a dignified self-possession which was in singular contrast with the childlike glee within. She seemed too proud to betray excessive joy or astonishment at anything which so affected her, lest perhaps it

should appear the frivolous emotion of an immature *naïveté*. Even elsewhere, when under her husband's eye alone, she showed extreme reserve in such emotional display ; but obvious intellectual enthusiasm she permitted to characterise her at all times.

Whilst waiting for the curtain to rise, Barbara was not above glancing at those gathered about her. To say truth, this played a very important part in her enjoyment ; for bred, as we know, in the depth of rural seclusion, nothing so stirred her pulse as the sight of, or perhaps the contact with, a cultivated crowd. She enjoyed to speculate upon the lives of her attractive neighbours, and to follow them about through all their refined vagaries. The country girl, exceptionally lettered as

she was, doubtless made many ludicrous miscalculations in her estimates, but they would most probably all have erred on the side of generosity, so nobody was the loser by her flights.

Remarks frequently passed between her husband and herself,—many times solely on account of Diall's ecstatic condition not permitting him to keep silent. He, too, criticised his neighbours in a more quizzical vein than Barbara ever permitted herself. Sometimes she laughed, sometimes she administered a reproof; but whichever the reception of his jest she was equally divine to him. For some little time this had been their occupation, when Barbara, upon glancing to the back, started suddenly, and laid her hand upon her husband's.

‘There now!’ she exclaimed in a whisper.
‘Will that convince you?’

‘What? Where?’ asked Diall, with breathless interest.

She told him where to look,—some rows behind them,—and she looked herself, when, to the conviction of both of them, they looked directly into the face of Edmund Rowe. Some people were entering at the moment, but Diall rose to examine more carefully, trying to identify the figure which so distinctly he had seen. He looked eagerly, impatiently, his eyebrows knitted.

‘Where—where is he?’ he asked of his wife, impetuously.

‘I can’t see him now. There—is that? No. That is the seat, look, empty. He has fled again.’

Diall stared for a short time longer, but was obliged to give in. He could not recapture the vision, so sat down.

' You saw him ?' asked Barbara.

' I will swear it was the man,' said he.

' What on earth is the meaning of it ?'

Whatever the quality of Barbara's vision, her husband had this time unmistakably shared it. No longer could he taunt her with a taste for the supernatural, for what applied to her applied to himself as strongly. He was annoyed and disturbed by the incident. He could not give his mind to the play for the thought of it. Frequently he turned his head, and regardless of all decorum scanned anxiously the seats behind. The one which Barbara had indicated was now occupied, but by no figure resembling that one. Nowhere was there

to be seen anyone, however distantly, resembling that. It seemed as though the conclusion was irresistible that Rowe had indeed been there, and, seeing them, fled.

‘But, Barbara,’ exclaimed Diall, at a fitting moment, ‘the man would never come into the dress-circle alone. We always went into the pit. He would never do it. It cannot have been he.’

‘You must settle it,’ Barbara would reply. ‘You have admitted to the vision. It is the same that I had in the Museum.’

It was not again presented, however eagerly sought for. Diall continued in a state of perplexity. Of course, obviously, the first step was to discover whether Rowe had as an actual fact been absent from Murcott on this date. If he had—

the flood-gates were opened for a torrent of puzzling speculation upon his character : if he had not, an equally, nay, a far more puzzling investigation would confront them. That one may be deluded upon such a point is very easily conceded : but that two may be so is more difficult of acceptance.

Whatever the issue, this particular evening had been hopelessly disturbed by it, and Diall was in no way sorry when the privacy of their own room enabled them to discuss the problem more freely.

' Suppose it should turn out that he has indeed been up here, what on earth can explain his conduct ? '

' Why not a mere nervous freak ? Although he can write freely to you, personal intercourse may be a different matter.

Besides, if he is conscious of a still further modification of the theory, might he not be shy of disclosing it ?'

' I suppose he might,' said Diall, ' but I have no patience with such diseased proceedings. If a man writes to me as a friend, he has no right to dodge me round a street-corner. I will not accept that footing. What man short of a lunatic can be ashamed of being seen in London if he is here upon any decent enterprise ?'

' I don't think you make sufficient allowance for Rowe's peculiar temperament ?'

' It's just that so-called temperament that will hang him at last. If he had followed my advice, it would have been shaken out of him long since. The man has got hold of a lot of maudlin sentiment, rife enough

in this day, and which can only lead to fatuity. if not positive crime. I cannot away with it.'

' But we may be passing wholly erroneous judgment upon poor Rowe. What if he has never left Murcott ?'

' Then he ought to have done,' exclaimed her husband.

Seeing sheer perversity approaching, Barbara endeavoured to, and ultimately succeeded in, changing the topic.

The next day, however, she wrote to Miriam, and in due course received reply. In it was stated that Mr. Rowe had been away since Monday, having returned that day. Diall read the letter.

' Then the man is a fool or a scoundrel,' was all his comment.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GOAL.

THERE was much interest excited by Rowe's announcement of his intention to resume this winter his series of popular addresses upon the history and the ethical agency of the pastoral state. He commenced with a disquisition upon the cider-press, historical and imaginative, and the subject was received with genuine approval.

This was given a few days after his return from that unexplained journey. It

was a fine starlight night, and all the village attended, with the rector in the chair. The latter made a few introductory remarks upon Mr. Rowe's object in resuming his labours, and expressed the gratification which all must feel at having such a source of—such a source of 'intellectual refinement' brought into their very midst. At the conclusion again, in summing-up, the reverend gentleman commented further upon these manifest advantages, and laid stress upon the fact that, judging from the 'ennobling strain of eloquence' to which they had just been the privileged listeners, their valued neighbour intended this winter, if that were possible, to surpass the appetising fare with which he had regaled them the previous season, and that it only remained for them to show

how fully they appreciated his efforts. The audience endorsed the vicar's sentiments in bucolic wise, and then dispersed.

Both Miriam and Eulalie had, of course, been present. The latter went home alone, slowly and thoughtfully. Miriam went another way with her betrothed. She too was thoughtful, perhaps more definitely so than upon former similar occasions. Nevertheless, the lover's arm was not repulsed, so it is to be presumed that he knew some measure of content.

'Why be you so still to-night, Miriam?' he asked, though, presently.

'They are beautiful words he says, aren't they, Luke?'

'Ay, ay, they be good enough for men like he,' he answered, 'but they won't do if you've got a living to make.'

Just then the man's hand was on her arm,—a very white arm above the elbow, and upon the delicate skin of which she had only that morning examined some fading bruises, not wholly faded yet,—and the touch, reminding her, made her jump.

'But they *will* do,' she asserted, with more spirit than she usually showed. 'It is just for you that have got a living to make that they will do. He says so.'

Limbrick knew that upon this topic he had to exercise some reserve, nevertheless he entered upon a mild expostulation, illustrated from the practical life familiar to him. But Miriam was not to be convinced. She thought, and announced her opinion, that, if everybody would think of things as Mr. Rowe bade them, the country would be a very pleasant place to live in.

The girl stuck to the topic with unusual persistency throughout the walk, and it was not until they reached the farm-yard gate that poor Limbrick was able to introduce more personal concerns. Even then, there were suspicions of Miriam showing a decided inclination to bring the interview to an end before he had opened his reserve. At his request she paused.

‘I’ve been thinking, Miriam, that we might get married at Christmas after all, if you’ll say so. It ’ull only mean a little extra saving afterwards, and you won’t mind that, will you?’

Luke did not know of certain intentions of Diall’s towards the girl upon her marriage, else his calculations might have been modified considerably.

'No, I shan't mind,' she replied. 'I have never been used to a deal.'

She spoke quietly, and without any obvious interest in the enterprise. She did not know why,—at least it had got to the stage of her asserting to herself that she did not know why,—but it was clear that her zeal for this marriage, which in any case could be at no great distance from her, did not increase. She had said the above words almost without thinking, but no sooner were they uttered than she wished them recalled.

'Eh, you be a good girl, Miriam,' said her lover, enthusiastically, with a caress, 'there be few like you. It 'ull be a joy to work for you, that it will. You shall have a farm-house again, darling, like your grandfather. I promise 'ee that.'

‘Yes, it ’ll be nice to have that.’

‘Then will you promise Christmas?’ he whispered, with his brawny arm encircling her neck.

‘It be very near,’ said she.

‘Seven weeks next Thursday.’

‘Only seven weeks, and me to be a wife! I’ve never thought of it, Luke. Let me think of it.’

‘Never thought of it, and we’ve been engaged all these months!’ he exclaimed, in an injured tone.

‘I mean—I mean I have never thought of it so near. You may think of a thing far off, and think that it will never happen, but when it comes upon you so sudden it be different.’

His arm relaxed somewhat. ‘And did you think as this would never happen?’

‘No, Luke, no; not this, of course. I mean some things,—other nice happy things. I have known this would happen. I really have. I will marry you.’

‘At Christmas? Say at Christmas, Miriam. I’m not content without you. I can’t work really solid for thinking of you.’

‘Yes, Luke, at Christmas.’ He gave her one more hug, and she ran in.

But, before entering the house-door, she paused. What had she said? To be his wife, always his, so soon! It overwhelmed her as never before. Oh, she could not do it. She did not want to marry him. She must be truthful and tell him; so she ran back to the gate where he had stood. He was not there now. She called, as she thought, loudly; but there was no re-

sponse. Sadly she turned round again, and went into the house.

All Rowe's vigour had come back to him. He planned out his winter's work with enthusiasm ; nor did he confine himself alone to this. His interests began again to widen. Once more a daily morning paper came to the Pool Farm ; two or three weeklies also ; and he had a box from Mudie's ! Obviously he advanced. This was perhaps for the fuller development of his theory.

Knowing or affecting to know nothing of Diall's speculations about him, he still wrote fully to his friend, and confessed these modifications.

'I find,'—he would honestly say in such a letter,—'I find that for one of my intellectual activity bucolic enterprise is

not alone sufficient. The great world roars over there behind the wood with a marvellous power of fascination. The fact is that perhaps a judicious combination is the proper course. But of course this hardly affects my original contention. The pastoral life, for those that are fitted for it, is capable of the idealization for which I have argued, and on these lines I shall continue my exhortations.'

The mirth at Chelsea over the receipt of such a letter, was, under the circumstances, unseemly.

'This passes!' would roar the uproarious Diall. 'We shall have further development anon.'

But with this apparently Rowe was for the present content. His impetuosity revived, certainly, and sundry other exter-

nal characteristics were developed, but they were beyond the ken of Chelsea, and Diall knew not of them. Thus some little time went by.

Concurrently with this exuberance of enterprise outside, Rowe's domestic relations likewise underwent a little change. Affable he endeavoured to be with all; but, singularly, in the case of one, he experienced persistent failure of his efforts. It was all the more remarkable, insomuch as it was the one with whom he had always felt upon the terms of greatest ease. Since emerging that evening in the twilight from the cart-shed, he had never been able to practise affability towards Eulalie. It was not with any satisfaction that he addressed her, and look at her he could not. It followed, therefore, that

very soon there was mutual avoidance instituted between them. Towards Miriam there was none of it.

It wanted about three weeks to Christmas, when one day Eulalie came in very pale to her sister. More or less pale she always was now, and very much thinner than of old. All her old purity and brilliance of complexion was leaving her, so obviously so as at last to have excited attention. It was to the privacy of Miriam's bed-room that she entered, and the latter, seeing the exceptional pallor of the intruder's cheeks, was reminded of a former occasion.

' Lalie, you be a-going to faint ?'

' No, Miriam, I am not.'

There was a quickness, almost impatience of utterance, such as the elder

had noticed more than once before. The old naïve confidence no longer existed between the sisters, had not for some time past existed. They regarded each other for a moment silently, Miriam, at any rate, in a remarkably picturesque condition and attitude.

‘ You are not going to marry Luke at Christmas ! ’ Eulalie’s lips remained parted.

‘ Pooh ! is that all ? ’ cried Miriam, petulantly, turning to the glass again.

‘ Miriam, why not ? Tell me—dear Miriam.’

‘ I only half promised him. It’s too sudden, Lalie ; why, it’s only three weeks ! ’

‘ Yes, but you have been engaged to him for months. You have had a long time to think of it. There is something else.’

The little lame thing trembled obviously as she was speaking. Miriam looked at her again.

‘What do you mean? What else?’

‘There is something between you and Mr. Rowe. I know there is, so don’t deny it. I have seen it for a long time. You know how I have warned you.’ And the two glistening tears fell from Eulalie’s eyelashes.

‘There is nothing, Lalie, I tell you,’ said the other, when at length she was able,—she stood at first with her large round eyes fixed upon her sister, and her lips apart. ‘There is nothing between us. What can there be between us?’

‘Tell me, Miriam,—darling Miriam, do tell me,’ said the younger, passionately, going up, and hanging upon her sister’s

naked shoulders. ‘ I love you so much, do tell me. I can’t bear to think of it.’

Miriam’s strong arms enfolded the delicate little frame tenderly, and, imprinting warm kisses on the head which was pressed firmly to her breast, she again and again asserted that the loving fears were groundless.

‘ He has never spoken to me—not like that—since that night you saw us. He hasn’t, Lalie, really.’

‘ Oh, I am afraid, I am afraid,’ shuddered Eulalie, sheltering herself more closely in her sister’s arms. ‘ I wish we could go away, Miriam, far away from here. I wish we had never—never left our dear little cottage,—I wish you had never come home,—and I—I wish we had *never* seen him. Oh, I do !’

Despite all fears and persuasion, Miriam could not be induced to consent to the marriage at Christmas. Oh, yes, she *would* marry Luke Limbrick; of course, she *would*—who else, indeed, should she?—but it must be further off; she must have longer time to get accustomed to the thought. Thus it was agreed, and they persecuted her no longer. Something was said about Easter, but no definite pledges were taken.

Of these proceedings, Rowe remained wholly ignorant. He had inevitably heard of the change which had taken place in Miriam's intentions, for owing to about a fortnight's acquiescence the marriage had been spoken of in the house. Apparently, he treated the affair lightly, as possibly of little concern to him. Certainly, he made

no sort of reference to it in anybody's hearing.

He planned a repetition of the Christmas festivities, but this time upon a larger scale. Sundry of the villagers were to share the mirth of the inmates of the Pool Farm, and needless to say that Luke Limbrick was one of them. The preparations were consequently more extensive, and they were effected smoothly through those preceding days.

Eulalie had enforced upon herself,—for it was nothing less,—a certain measure of reassurance, and she felt bound to admit that these critical doings sustained it. Not the least cause of this, undoubtedly, lay in Rowe's undisguised efforts to restore something of the former footing between

them. He would come in to aid the girls in their work of decoration,—never this year singly,—and would talk indifferently to either. Certainly, Eulalie never looked at him, as her sister did, when he spoke to her, but she answered him with lessening difficulty. So Christmas Eve arrived.

Here, too, nothing arose to directly reawaken that sickening sensation of fear. Wholly extinct it was not,—that she could not pretend ; but some day,—yes, perhaps some day,—it really might be. Rowe danced once with Miriam, certainly, it would have been noticeable otherwise ; but with her most anxious scrutiny Eulalie could gather nothing disquieting. Perhaps it was owing to Bezaleel's absence that the game necessitating withdrawal was not sug-

gested. Despite all consolatory reflections, when Eulalie was at length in bed, she cried herself to sleep at the thought that it was not the marriage festival they had been celebrating.

For the next day or two, Rowe, in the recesses of his consciousness, was congratulating himself upon a victory. He had gone to the enterprise with fierce tumultuous excitement, excitement which, to the general gaze, had become a mere seasonable exhilaration ; but, happily, results had belied the augury. For some weeks now he had walked fearfully. He armed himself with whatever was presented ; he worked, he read, he wrote—passionately, desperately ; but at the back of all he knew there still lurked that crippling dread,—a dread of being thrust

by the hand of fate upon another interview like that one in the twilight. He felt that he did all ; but he did not flee.

Flee he could not. Once he had,—for from that unexplained journey he had intended never to return ; but still here he was, struggling for deliverance, and becoming only the more conscious of his bonds. Tied here by unbreakable chains to play his part, whether for good or ill. And at length he played it.

On the night of the festivities Eulalie had caught a cold, and two days later was in bed with threats of a serious illness. Her mother, in the anxiety of maternal affection, never left the room, being released from all her other duties to attend upon the girl. It was the day after this arrangement had been made, in the even-

ing, that Rowe burst into the kitchen in an excited state. The sick girl was not the only patient on the farm, for Rowe had also his, a cow, and to his credit it must be said that he seemed to expend as much solicitude upon his ailing beast as the mother did upon her child. He came in and clamoured for his wants.

‘Isn’t Anne here?’ he asked, quickly, looking at the only person in the room, who, of course, had risen to attend to him.

‘No, sir, she’s out.’

‘Then quick, Miriam. I must mix it instantly.’

No time was lost in the process, and then Rowe hurried to the door.

‘Is there nobody else here?’ he said, vexatiously. ‘I wanted help. Sam ought never to have gone with her like this.’

'I'll come, sir,' cried Miriam, with alacrity.

'Put a shawl over your head; be quick.'

She followed him out rapidly, crossed the yard beneath the frosty starlight, and they were forthwith at the house whence issued the restless groans, and the glimmering lantern light. The beast was lying on the straw, and on the top of an overturned bucket stood the lantern which Rowe had left. He knelt at the cow's head, and manipulating her jaws bade Miriam administer the dose. There was nothing humorous in the situation to the two engaged in it, however it might have appeared to a disinterested onlooker. Their two faces were bent quite seriously to the task.

' That's four ; six will be enough. There, poor old woman, you'll lie easier after that.'

He and Miriam rose, and for a minute or two they stood silently side by side regarding the animal. Apparently regarding it, but one of them in appearance only. Rowe's eyes were fixed and sightless, the whole of his frame quivered.

' Will you want anything more, sir ?' asked Miriam, simply ; but he did not hear her, or affected not to hear.

She moved ; but without altering his position, he said, thickly, scarce articulately,

' Stay, Miriam,—a minute,' then relapsed into his former state.

' Yes, go, I want—nothing more,' he cried the next moment, impulsively.

The girl turned and walked towards the door; but, ere she reached it, she heard a rustle in the straw, and felt a hand upon her arm.

‘Miriam——’ issued from some cavernous depth, in a husky, unnatural tone,—
‘dear Miriam——’

The girl now trembled in every fibre, but turned and faced him. He drew her gently back.

‘Stay—a minute—I want to speak to you.’

Therewith he snatched up the lantern, and held it between their faces.

‘Look at me now well—as you did that day when you kissed me—yes, kissed me, Miriam,’ he repeated, with a triumphant, unnatural laugh. ‘Will you never tell me why you kissed me?’

His look altered to a lighter glance, still altered; and Miriam bent her eyes, and, surely, smiled. But she kept silence.

‘Look up! Let me see your eyes,—so. You shan’t go until you tell me that.’

It was uttered playfully, not with any of that impulsive fierceness which had at times appeared in him, and which invariably unnerved her: but with an alluring, reassuring twinkle. Still she kept silence.

‘I can feel them now, Miriam, those warm, those passionate kisses,’ he began, more ardently. ‘They burnt into my heart, and they burn there still. I can feel these soft and sheltering arms about me—there! But differently—you thought me killed, and—loved me. You did not fear to show it then. Why do you fear me living? Such a love, Miriam, that it

could restore the dead to life. It pierced my senseless frame to the core, quickened it with a burning living heat, set a flame to it which since has never flickered. Did you know that you had done all that ?'

' No,' she faltered, scarcely knowing it.

' Do you think I did not know why you longed for freedom ?' he laughed into her ear. ' Shall I tell you again—again ?'

Miriam was whirled through rapid phases. Her tremulous astonishment was soothed to listless content, only to be hurried on to a quick, unreasoning rapture. His electric frame communicated its magic current, irresistibly, overwhelmingly, and she felt her muscles tighten. That frenzied impulse, which only once before in her life had swayed her, carried her

away now, and at last, finally and irrevocably, she knew that it was love.

Rowe immediately perceived the change.

‘You know,’ he went on, vehemently : ‘now you know. Blind and foolish girl ! . . . Tell me, Miriam . . .’

She confided her discovery to him in a whisper ; but the words were scarcely from her lips before she burst into passionate tears, and, tearing herself from his arms, ran impetuously into the darkness without.

Rowe leaned with his back against the wall, and placed his hand to his throbbing forehead ; but only a defiant smile was on his features. He knew of no compunction from the scene : only a sense of victory inflamed him.

Presently he came out from the building, fastened the door, and then extin-

guished the lantern. His pulse still ran high, and, as all was so intensely calm around, he walked out towards the ricks, in the hope of imparting some of this peace to his disordered soul. The twinkling stars responded to his gaze, and seemed to share his ecstatic revelry. By their suggestion of a wider sphere, by their adjustment of his relationship to the boundless plain ‘of all this unintelligible world,’ his exhilaration grew fiercer and more defiant, and he laughed aloud. To and fro he paced, in and about the ricks, far enough from gathering from them any measure of repose. The quality of his perturbation became changed, undoubtedly; but perturbation remained. His mind refused to linger in the placid sunlit fields, such as afford to the normal lover

so great content. Over his horizon hovered the threatening clouds, and amidst them lurked the rumbling thunder. But his eyes glistened as he gazed at them ; he bade them heartily come on.

For some quarter-of-an-hour he must have wandered there. When, of a sudden, he grew calm, he found that in one hand was clenched a wisp of hay ; he flung it from him and laughed again. As he finished, he turned abruptly aside ; some sound had attracted him. He saw a dim figure flit into a gap between two wheatricks, and he stepped instantly towards it.

‘Who’s that?’ he said, quietly ; but he got no answer.

He went in where the figure had disappeared, and found nothing. Through beyond, and then he saw it darting round

the next one. He followed running, but the other ran out across the open.

‘Who’s that?’ he shouted, in an angry tone of authority.

The figure stopped, and he came up to it.

Did it surprise him or not?

‘Out here yet!’ he exclaimed, in real or feigned astonishment. His eyes were so accustomed to the obscurity that he could see her face. It made him very gentle to her, and she grew bolder.

‘I wish I had not said that, sir. I wanted to tell you.’

‘Not said it! Poor girl, you have not been crying ever since?’

‘Oh, no, sir. It makes me glad one minute, and makes me cry the next. I know I ought not to have said it.’

'Pooh, pooh ! Don't think that. You were bound to say it, Miriam ; you couldn't escape.'

'I think so too,' she said, with unusual alacrity. 'I didn't want to say it all the time, but something made me.'

'Do you want to unsay it?' he asked, eagerly. 'Would you unsay it if you could? Does it mean nothing to you? Doesn't it give you joy to think of it? Doesn't it, Miriam ?'

'Yes, sir, it does,' she faltered.

'Of course it does. And to me, Miriam, it is joy unspeakable. I can't tell you what it is to me.'

'What, you, sir ! Is it joy to you?' she cried, ecstatically.

'Of course it is. What did I tell you? Your kisses burned into my soul.'

‘Then you do love *me*, sir?’

‘Of course I do. Look at the stars laughing at you. Now run in.’

And Miriam did run in, comforted. He paced a short time longer, then entered also.

CHAPTER VII.

‘ ‘TIS NOT HEREAFTER.’

EULALIE was confined to her bedroom for more than three weeks. During the first week of the time the physician commanded the most absolute repose, and, from observation made in the course of a professional visit, he forbade any intercourse between the sisters until he saw fit to determine otherwise. This was a great blow to Miriam, for throughout the greater part of that specified time she ardently longed for a confidential talk with Eulalie.

The physician's fiat was removed, and presumably the girls might hasten to embrace; but the one with whom the accomplishment of such a consummation mainly lay did not avail herself of the opportunity. Miriam's eagerness had visibly abated, and it was not until Eulalie had three times definitely requested the interview, and Mrs. Medlicott in pursuance of such request had positively fetched the elder girl, that the sisters met. Then, beyond a profuse display of affection and a tendency to the hysterical, there was nothing unusual either in Miriam's bearing or conversation. Eulalie rallied her playfully upon her cheeks and upon her increasing ' prettiness.'

' Do you really think me prettier ?' said Miriam joyously at this. ' Really—really !

And you—poor dear Lalie! But you'll soon be well'

The little cripple was certainly much reduced. Her bright eyes, it is true, were perfected to a marvellous degree, but sadly at the expense of every other feature. The size and lustre of these two orbs, after the heedless excitement of the first meeting was over, impressed Miriam to awe: and yet they exercised such a fascination over her that she could not withdraw her gaze from them, probe her as deeply as ever they would. There was about them a singular force of searching spirituality, for one of Eulalie's simple nurture, not necessarily of the personally intrusive quality,—that would vary according to individual appropriation in the beholder,—but more of the placidly reflective, suggesting an

unconscious repose upon first principles, before which all adventitious superstructure dissolved into its native nothingness.

This first interview was not a prolonged one, and Miriam was unusually thoughtful when she had withdrawn. It was a mere coincidence, no doubt,—but one to be noted,—that when the elder sister descended the stairs from this visit, (she had passed some time in her own room on the way,) Rowe chanced to be issuing from the parlour door. He beckoned Miriam, and she followed him into the empty room. When there, for a second or two he critically, nay, nervously, examined her features. They were composed, unduly so, perhaps, but no tear-marks. He tried to smile, but the girl did not.

‘ She goes on well, Miriam ?’

‘Yes, but so altered. Her eyes went through and through me.’

‘Ah, yes, I know that appearance after illness. It is usually the case.’

Rowe coughed, and glanced at the window. Then his eyes rested again upon Miriam’s face. She was fingering the corner of the table-cloth.

‘You——’ He coughed again. She was hesitating, as though trying to speak.
‘You——’

‘I told her nothing about it,’ exclaimed Miriam, vehemently, with colour heightened. ‘Nothing. I daredn’t.’

‘Better so, I think, Miriam,’ was the unnaturally calm response. ‘Far better.’

He went forward and laid his hand upon her shoulder; but she did not raise her face, and did not move at all. He

removed his hand and went a step away.

'She shall soon be strong, Miriam. She shall have everything that money can get for her, everything.'

'I know that; I know that. Oh, you are so good to us.' Therewith the girl stepped to him and flung her arms around him in a passionate embrace.

'You love me—you love me!' she murmured in his ear.

When she parted, her face was bright and joyous, and she ran off to her work. Rowe stood with his knuckles on the table and looked out of the window, continuing for some time to stare at the cheerless January prospect. Then he shuddered from head to foot.

Eulalie did regain her strength rapidly, very largely in consequence, no doubt, of

the liberal supply of nourishing luxuries procured by the master's order, nay, more often by his own personal endeavours. So the weeks went on.

During the course of Eulalie's illness, she had a curious fancy for imagining herself again at the Downs. She had had no actual delirium all the time, but at the height of feverishness her mind at times gently wandered beyond control into the placid scenes of her former life. She would tell her mother how many pairs of gloves she had sewn that day,—how the wind was howling in the High Wood,—how Netta, her squirrel which had escaped and never returned after her leaving the Downs, had not been in for several days,—and would the next moment upon recollection correct herself. With the fever,

this weakness of course departed; but the attractive thought of her old existence at the Downs, so far from departing, became daily stronger. It chanced that the woodland cottage had become vacant at the end of January, and had thus become a topic of particular conversation at the farm. Perhaps this had caused Eulalie's fleeting fancy to take such permanent hold of her mind.

It grew daily in strength, until, in far from a spirit of jocularity, she one day privately asked her mother if she would not like to be back at the Downs. The honest woman confessed that she should not, so the topic then fell. It recurred, however, constantly, in some direct or indirect manner, and made impression at length upon the observant mother's mind.

‘ You want to go back to the Downs, I do believe, Lalie,’ she said one day, when the subject had as usual arisen.

‘ I think I do, mother.’

‘ Well, I will say as you have never been the same down here, never. Master Winnett used to say that. It might do you good to go back.’

They talked on about it, and it was thus that the consideration grew into the dimensions of a practical project.

When really propounded in this way, it was remarkable with what rapidity the enterprise was communicated, discussed, approved of, and put into execution. No mere personal considerations could for a moment influence Mrs. Medlicott in her judgment upon topics arising out of the welfare of her crippled and (hence, no

doubt,) favourite daughter. Even the doctor himself had strengthened, by his opinion, the conjectural likelihood of a return to her former residence bracing Eulalie up into something like her former self. This had been the conclusion of the matter, and without more delay the old cottage had been procured for Mrs. Medlicott and her daughter to return to.

Rowe had shown a wholly unexpected indifference towards the consideration. He approved of it, yes, if it were for Eulalie's good, and would do all in his power to convenience them. Their furniture, of course, they had never parted with ; it was all stored in an attic at the farm, except the chair with which Mrs. Medlicott could not dispense, and a chest which she had required in her bed-room. All his carts

were at their disposal. His behaviour, however, did not cause all the surprise which one would have looked for.

Throughout the months of January and February, there had been a steadily progressive change observable in Rowe. His spirits flagged, and his looks suffered in a corresponding degree. His popular addresses had been sustained with regularity, but with what effect was apparent from some remarks of the rector's during the latter month, which were the means, indeed, of bringing the series, at any rate for the time being, to a close.

After a meeting in the school-room upon the usual lines, the clergyman took Rowe home with him.

‘ You are far from well, Mr. Rowe,’ he said, with kindly solicitude in the calm of

his fragrant study. ‘Why not let us bring the course to an end for this season? Let me as a friend say openly that you are not in trim to do yourself and your subjects justice. You will understand an old man?’

‘I’m not well, that’s true,’ Rowe answered; ‘but what on earth is the matter I can’t make out. I suffer from no recognisable ailment; but I’ve no energy for anything. It must be this damp, foggy weather, I suppose. I have felt the lectures wretchedly inadequate. Perhaps it will be simplest to stop them for the present, as you say.’

This was how Rowe at length escaped from a task which he had begun to feel irksome,—nay, loathsome in the most inexpressible degree. The whole range

of his pastoral theory had of late weeks undergone a serious revision, and the various results had not been conducive to equanimity. He had, in fact, more than once meditated an entire abandonment of the pastoral question, in practice no less than in theory, and only a certain indecisiveness of temperament had hitherto prevented him taking some action upon it. He had, in these days, relapsed into a depth of nervous irritability and introspection exceeding immeasurably that of the old period of futility which had caused so much exasperation to his friend Diall in former days. The change in him was of course inevitably a matter for universal comment. One pair of eyes especially had noted it from the first with singular keenness, and had coupled it with

other observations, not without results. How far her own domiciliary requirements were part of them may be left to conjecture.

It was about the middle of February when Eulalie one day, under favourable circumstances, ventured to renew the subject of marriage with her sister. The latter's behaviour had struck her.

'I don't think I shall ever marry him,' Miriam had asserted.

'Never!' cried the other, aghast, but checked herself. 'Do you love somebody else, Miriam?' she asked instead, quietly.

Miriam reddened.

'No,' she exclaimed, fiercely; and went away. This was her first direct lie.

The consequences were so disquieting to Eulalie that a week or two passed before

she felt able to approach the subject again. Not until the very day of her departure from the farm did she venture to resume it. Then, owing no doubt to confirmation of physical strength, her resolution returned, reinforced. She had some parting words for her sister.

‘Miriam, you are in love with Mr. Rowe,’ she said, this time, ‘and he with you. If——’

With some words of Rowe’s, scarce an hour old, fresh in her mind, Miriam turned round vehemently.

‘It is a story, Lalie. I’m not.’ And she faced it out.

Eulalie did not weep and appeal this time. All that was far behind. Oh, that it were not! The cart was nearly ready for her, but it mattered not. Directly,

then and there, she left the house and went about the farm, snowing though it was, until she found Rowe a field or two off. He started at seeing her, and turned pale. He never, at any time, boasted much colour these days.

‘ You, at any rate, sir, will not tell me a lie,’ she began, boldly, at once, for the labourer was far out of hearing. ‘ Are you not in love with Miriam, and she with you ?’

‘ I ! She !’ he exclaimed, starting back, and regarding his antagonist. He longed to lie, but, as if conscious of their power, Eulalie had fixed her eyes upon him. ‘ We were, Eulalie, but it is over now.’

‘ Over now,’ she repeated, vacantly ; but, collecting herself, ‘ Does she think so ?’ she asked.

‘Yes.’

And Rowe knew that he was cursed,—cursed perhaps in the foulest wise whereby mortal man can be cursed. He had uttered the word boldly, unblushingly. She accepted it, and would have left him.

‘Stay, Eulalie. I was just coming up to see you go.’

‘Don’t trouble, sir, thank you. They have got everything ready.’

Eulalie was, of course, not capable of sarcasm, nor did her tone in the least suggest it. But Rowe felt a violent blow. He had already prepared much farewell matter for Eulalie, and the opportunity did not appear unfavourable, but his tongue refused him. He did not even say good-bye.

Rooted to the ground, he watched her cross the fields and disappear: then he moved. He crossed other fields towards the wood. Sodden they were with half-melted snow, and it was still snowing now: but he did not know it.

Very still and sombre the wood was, with its purple depths stretching away behind the grey-green trunks. A jay added its curse of implacable hatred and execration as Rowe closed the gate behind him; *that* he heard, and it became the keynote to his thoughts.

He plunged on along the green trench, down the centre of which was a cart-track the wheel-marks of which were a foot deep. He often sank far over shoe-top in water, or mud, or both, but what cared he? He

was deeper in the mud than that, and such a mud! Mud to which this—— Bah! This, mere honest earth and water, nothing else.

For an hour he so plunged, with occasional pauses to lay his forehead against the furrowed trunk of some friendly tree; to lay it there and weep, such weeping as is possible to a full-grown man,—the suffocating constriction of the throat to excess, but tears hardly. Once, whilst doing so, he heard the rumble of a waggon in the wood, and he listened so long as it was audible. Wet and cold to the core, body and soul, at length he turned his steps homewards.

As though awaiting him, he met Miriam in the yard, despite the snow, looking pale and anxious.

'Let me speak to you now,' she said, quickly. 'I must speak to you.'

'And I to you. Where?' She set off as though orchardwards, but he checked her. 'Stay, Miriam. You shall not go out there. You will get wet through. The house is my own: come in, we can command a private room.'

Something in his manner struck her, agitated as she was. She followed him in, wondering. They entered the parlour, and found it empty. Rowe drew forth a chair for his companion, but she continued standing.

'I must not hide it longer,' she began. 'Oh, I ought never to have hidden it—never. But'—she stepped forward to him, and seized one of his hands—'you will marry me—now?'

Her wide-open eyes were fixed anxiously upon his face. He quivered from head to foot : she perceived it.

‘ Miriam, I cannot marry you,’ he replied, in a measured tone, as though to announce it the result of final deliberation.

He looked at her and shuddered. He had known that this was before him ; had seen it through that purple vista of the trees an hour ago. Her full, rounded face, colourless, suggesting nothing more than tragic vacuity of soul. His hand remained in hers,—until he withdrew it and moved a step away.

‘ I cannot marry you, Miriam ; there is no such easy deliverance for me.’

A hollow mocking laugh escaped him. She remained motionless ; had possibly not heard his words.

'Oh, God, that there were! At first I thought it,—a burning thought, bred of a mad desire for escape ; but the fogs have cleared. I should only deepen, perpetuate my sin by marrying you.'

He looked at her, and every muscle writhed. Clapping his hand to his breast he took some paces along the floor ; then returned and faced her. For an instant he regarded her earnestly.

'Listen, Miriam—dearest Miriam, do listen to me ; can you hear ?'

Her face was turned to him, but it was still expressionless.

'Yes, I can hear.'

'You think that marriage would restore us, would repair every wrong ; so the world would think. But it is a lie, a hellish lie. It is far, far worse than no

repair. My sin is for ever irreparable.'

He spoke with such furious emphasis that Miriam's old fear of him again awoke, and she shrank back. He again began to pace, speaking as he moved about.

' Suppose I marry you,' he began, more calmly; ' suppose I follow my mad desire to repair the iniquity I have perpetrated. The world would smile, note the outcome, and say that I was an honest man. But I should know myself for the basest scoundrel, for I can see beyond, Miriam. And so would you; we should both be cursed, instead of me alone. To be tied to this life would drive me mad, and for you no other is possible. This life is loathsome to me,' he said, excitedly; ' day by day I have been getting brutalized,

sinking down to the mire of the animals in the fields, to that of the boors that tend them. Deeper and deeper I should sink, rapidly, until I got to hate you, hate you, Miriam. Oh, I might live to kill you even ; God knows. Would this repair my wrong ?'

He paced away excitedly.

' Again, I marry and leave you. Would that be reparation ?' Again she started as he faced her. ' Would it be restitution to condemn you to—what were for you a living death ? Would this appease your suffering ? Tell me, Miriam, would it ? '

He seemed to expect a No, so far as she could determine, so she gave him one scarce audible.

' It is beyond repair. Hell is for me

eternally ; you shall be delivered. Hear me, Miriam ; can you hear me ?'

' Yes, sir,'—she was frightened back to the old appellation.

' I do not marry you, then see what follows. I do not prostitute myself to a base, a sham convention. I take no unction to my soul for honesty recovered by such vile means. Indeed, I do not repudiate my sin in any way. I cling to it to be a purifying fire to the end of time. Do you understand me, Miriam ?'

' Yes, sir, I think so.'

' I can never be absolved—never ; but this frightful fire can burn me on my way. Oh, Miriam, Miriam, that I could assure you !'

' But you will be forgiven, sir ; I am sure you will,' she cried, stepping up to

him, impetuous, anxious love suddenly flushing all her features. ‘Everything can be forgiven, and you—you meant no wrong. Oh, it was all my fault !’

‘Hush !’ he said, drawing back. ‘Although I cannot rescue you, time will bring your deliverance. You will suffer, terribly for a time, but time will heal you. If I marry you, it is never healed,—deepened eternally. Can you—can you possibly believe me, Miriam ?’

‘You must be right.’

The sight was too painful for him, and he turned away to pace. Suddenly he began to speak hurriedly.

‘I shall go away from here ; and shall never return. This farm will be yours, your own entirely. Do not mistake it. It is not to increase my crime. It is not for

a recompense to you—bah! if you could think that, Miriam, I would burn the place to the ground rather; burn every stick and every straw about the building. It is only as a paltry sacrifice for myself—I can do nothing—nothing. Tell Eulalie all about it,—everything, you understand. The sooner the better.'

There was again that tragic submission in her looks, but no word or sound came from her.

'Do you fully understand this, Miriam?'

'Yes, sir.'

Therewith Rowe turned away from her and walked towards the door. But before he reached it she was by him.

'Are you going away from here, sir? Right away—from me?'

‘Yes,’ he replied, firmly, ‘right——’
He checked himself.

‘Will you never marry me?’

‘I have told you . . . Do you think it is nothing to me, Miriam?’

She fell away from him stunned, and returned to the table without any signs of animation in her features. He passed out quickly.

It was only the entrance of the house-keeper that aroused Miriam. At the sound of intrusion, the girl broke from her reverie and vanished through the doorway without a word. She sought the privacy of her bed-room, and there relapsed into her former state. Reflective it could hardly be termed, for the mental current was wholly involuntary, nay, current there was none. There was no abandonment, though;

no tear had dimmed her vision since the beginning of the interview. It was a kind of emotional stupefaction that had overwhelmed her. Even in everyday affairs she was unable to concatenate ; the present predicament was hardly likely to impart to her the faculty. Rowe's civilized sophistry had dazed her. She had his word that he had loved her. Her creed had been always of the simplest. Love, even if for a time concealed, meant marriage ; she was now, with startling abruptness, asked to believe that it meant nothing of the sort. What it signified instead, Rowe's incoherent utterances had been unable to instruct her. She had confessed to understanding them, but even of such incoherent admission she would now have

been wholly ignorant. Something of a farm-house, more of an everlasting parting, lingered confusedly in her brain.

In this torpid mental state she continued for a long time, although ostensibly going about her work with accustomed assiduity. Her duties had become habitual to her, and called for no conscious effort of the mind. In the night she wept, a little, but wholly inadequately. The next morning found her unaltered.

As the day advanced, Miriam became conscious that the others were regarding her. The modification of domestic arrangements she had failed to notice. This other perception quickened her fancy, and she felt a desperate longing to escape. As by inspiration, words of his suddenly recurred

to her.—‘Tell Eulalie all about it,—everything.’ Here was at last a temporary deliverance: it suggested action.

Without word to anybody, she withdrew. It was just before the kitchen dinner-time. She put on some things hurriedly, her hands trembling as she did so in obvious indication of returning consciousness.

‘Tell Eulalie—everything.’

Some magic seemed to lurk in that simple formula. Now that it had found her, it kept on dancing in her brain persistently, with ever-widening suggestion. The love for her sister, which at times she had even considered lessened, burst forth now again with redoubled fervour. She had lied to her—for him; nevertheless, she

had lied to her. What action was suggested by that fact alone ! What an outlet to her imprisoned senses it opened !

Noiselessly she descended the stairs, and, as she thought, noiselessly she slipt away.

‘Where be Miriam a-going?’ asked the other maid of the housekeeper at the sound.

The woman shook her head, and avoided the question.

In the yard a boy came from the barn whistling. Miriam had to pass close beside him.

‘S—st ! Miriam ! Where be the master ?’ he asked, jeering.

She hastened on without look or answer. He put his hands in his pockets, drew up

his substantial lips to such relative contraction as was possible, and gave brief expression to his jocular reflections.

CHAPTER VIII.

HEY, HO, THE WIND AND THE RAIN.

IT was milder to-day, and a stiff south-west wind was flinging scuds of rain over the country from time to time, and they and the warmth were rapidly annihilating the snow that lingered. The High Wood which crowned the ridge rose black against the sullen sky, the grey billows overhead hurrying on unbroken. The whole earth was saturated with moisture, and the air was redolent of it. The ditches babbled

and foamed, brimful. Mingled snow and rain glistened red in the furrows at angry sunrise, prohibiting all field-work, and throwing everything agricultural far behind.

Now at grey mid-day, Luke Limbrick had come down to his handful of sheep, penned in hurdles, to administer rations. In countenance he was what is locally termed ‘solid :’ composed, grimly meditative. He could not afford a machine to chop his turnips, so he just flung them whole from the opened heap to the flock pressing eagerly to the hurdles. When his task was completed, his eyes wandered idly over the adjacent lands, lying between him and the black High Wood. At the first glance his aspect changed. His eyes were gathered to a focus, and eagerness

was in them. Then at a run he set off towards the fence.

Splash, splash, he went, over the sudden mould, his boots smacking occasionally from a slip and suction. Over the hedge he clambered. In the next field he frightened a flock of starlings which lay chattering amidst the grass, and they took refuge in a great elm-tree hard by. Through a gate, and he was in the open, with a figure some little way ahead. His steps became audible, and this figure turned. Eyes fell instantly.

‘It be a fortnight yesterday since you spoke to me, Miriam,’ he began, in his breathless state. ‘I can’t go on like it. Will you marry me or no?’

‘I can’t marry you.’

His action showed the reply to be un-

expected; for who confesses to himself expectation of the inevitable?

'Not marry me at all--after all this time? Do you know what you say, Miriam?'

'Yes. I know now what I say. I can't marry you, Luke; I can never, never marry you.'

There was an unusual glow of resolution in Miriam's features,—a more conscious, deliberate resolution, free from the emotional impulse which, with her, generally passed for it. This perhaps amplified his surprise.

'Then 'tis all along of *he*,' he cried, in a mixture of indignation and despair; "'tis all along of *he*.'

Miriam turned from him without comment.

' Is it, Miriam ? Is he a-going to marry you ?'

He grasped her arm.

' No—no—I don't know . . . I can't tell you any more.'

' But I must know more, I tell you. Has he promised to marry you ?'

He walked on unheeded by the girl's side, his eyes fixed upon her colourless face.

' I have mistrusted him from the start,' he exclaimed, vehemently. ' He beunt an honest man. I'll swear to it. He have ne'er a bit of honesty in him. Don't trust him, Miriam ! He have been the ruin of both of ye, and will be more. I know he will.'

There was an excitement in the youth unusual with him also, but apparently she

paid no heed to it. Once more he appealed to her, not for his own advantage, but for the safety of herself,—sincerely, manfully.

‘St a-going to the Downs, Miriam?’ he concluded. ‘Stay there! Never come down again, never. It beunt a place for you now. Will you stay up there with your mother? Will you promise me?’

‘Yes,’ faltered Miriam. ‘I will never go to the Pool again.’

The assertion startled him, but, content with it, he turned and left her.

In passing through the wood Miriam was weeping, and, her vision being in consequence uncertain, she got sadly bemired. In every hollow of the grass which formed the roadway, water lay, and frequently she

stumbled into it unawares. But she proceeded doggedly, capable of receiving but slight impression from mere material inconvenience. At the last gate, with the cottage just before her, she paused ; until, upon coming to the doorway, Eulalie perceived her.

That day had been for Eulalie one of marvellous contentment. The cottage already presented exactly its old appearance, and doubtless the associations which it revived had in their freshness done much to neutralize the disquieting influences of the immediate present. The wind might howl, and the clouds lower,—the wood-peckers might yell derision, and the jays spit their harshest curse ;—but to Eulalie it all was blessing. They could only intensify the grateful impression of repose

which her old surroundings made upon her.

The sight of Eulalie there in such familiar setting struck Miriam too with singular force. For an instant she could fancy all this hysterical interval a mere feverish nightmare, from which, O mighty deliverance! she was just about to wake. Had she not come from the Pool, from converse with Miss Barbara, and from a passing jest with the old master in the yard? It seemed so real to her that, with a laugh, she bounded forward to her sister, who had hobbled to the gate, and buried her in an ecstatic embrace. The contact awakened her.

The mother could only exclaim, ‘ Why, Miriam, be you come?’ before the visitor dropped into a chair, and swaying forward

succumbed to uncontrollable sobs. Eulalie, pale, yet collected, caught her mother's arm and held her back.

'Stay, mother; not yet,' she whispered: And the two regarded Miriam silently.

To the unobservant mother this came as an amazing blow. Eulalie had been long prepared for it. Seeing that Miriam did not immediately recover, and that the other girl beheld her with such extraordinary calm, presently the bewildered woman turned her look to Eulalie.

'What—e-ver be the matter, Lalie?'

To her Eulalie gave no answer, but, loosening her mother's arm, stepped forward, and knelt at her sister's knee.

'Miriam,' she said, quietly. 'Miriam darling.'

There was no sort of response by word

or gesture, but Eulalie stayed there, one hand upon the chair's arm, the other upon the knee of her sister. The distracted mother, unable to appreciate this mode of procedure, pressed forward, but a sign from Eulalie repelled her. At that instant a stifled utterance came from amidst Miriam's hands. The other pressed her face closely and listened. There was no immediate repetition.

‘What is it, darling?’ whispered Eulalie.

‘S—send—mother—away,’ was this time distinguishable.

Eulalie did as she was bidden, and in consternation and perplexity the mother withdrew to the garden.

For a few moments the interior of the cottage was silent again, the ticking of the

clock with merciless regularity, and the disturbed breath of Miriam, alone audible. Outside the wind was rushing on fitfully ; now howling in the branches, now pausing for a sudden growl. To and fro the mother paced along the garden pathway, enveloped in a shawl ; her thoughts in a state of inextricable confusion, but all at intervals culminating in an irresistible submissiveness to fate.

‘Eh, ’twere the withy ; ’twere the withy !’ would she moan aloud ; and then renew her pacing.

Meanwhile Miriam was regaining self-control, and Eulalie waited patiently.

‘Oh, Lalie, if I’d told you sooner—instead—instead of telling you a lie ! But now I have to tell you all—everything he said ; but I can’t—I can’t.’

‘Yes, dear, you can. You are not afraid of me—of your poor little cripple,’ said the other, half-playfully.

For another moment Miriam was silent,—quite silent, no sob even escaping her; then sudden strength came to her, and she raised her face.

‘Lalie, I be going to have a child,’ she cried, impulsively, and continued to stare at her sister.

Eulalie’s lips remained just apart, little alteration to suggest in what way she received the blow. Perhaps it was no blow; but that were hardly possible. Whatever she had imagined herself prepared for, she also was only human.

‘Yes, Miriam,’ she uttered, and the lips closed.

‘You won’t hate me, Lalie,’ cried the

elder, clutching nervously at her sister, ‘you and mother won’t drive me away from home, like they did Lizzie Arkell; will you? Oh, don’t, Lalie, don’t! I want always to live with you. I can’t go anywhere else, or I shall die.’

‘Drive you away!’ said Eulalie, slowly, as if scarcely comprehending the suggestion. ‘No, no, of course not drive you away. But, Miriam, he must love you very, very much.’

‘He did; he said he did; but—but—’

‘Don’t,’ interposed Eulalie, laying her hand again upon her sister, ‘don’t cry. He will marry you, Miriam.’

Through her tears the elder girl passionately shook her head.

‘No, no, he can’t. He can never marry me, and he can never come back to me.’

Eulalie looked at her again in mute expressionless gaze.

‘He can’t marry me—he says he can’t.’

Miriam made no effort to supply the reasoning. How should she? Eulalie’s instinct was not likely to provide her with it.

‘Oh, yes, he will marry you,’ she said, rising and making her awkward way to a seat. What was love else?

‘But, Lalie, he says he can’t; he is going away from here for ever—for ever.’

‘Going away!’ said the other, with more obvious consciousness. ‘Has he told you so? When—when is he going?’

‘I don’t know—soon—perhaps to-day.’

Miriam relapsed into tears, but Eulalie’s face became instinct with eager thought. Presently she moved about. When the

other raised her face again, Eulalie was clad for a journey and the mother in the room.

‘I must go with ‘ee, Lalie,’ asserted the elder woman, rather crossly. ‘Teunt likely; I wouldn’t let ‘ee go all that way alone whatever. And the ground so soppy an’ all.’

‘Mother,’ said Eulalie, calmly, ‘you must stay just here with Miriam. I can go quite well, and very likely they will drive me back. You remember how I went through the snow that day when Miriam was away. It was a far worse day than this.’

The debate continued, and was only at length adjusted by Eulalie’s consenting to her mother accompanying her for a short distance to see how she got along. Then they at once set off.

Eulalie had an object in dispensing with her mother's company, for she trusted to the quietude and seclusion of the woods to aid her in definitely formulating her procedure. She knew no doubt or hesitation in regard to generalities, but conscious of an incipient bewilderment from mere stress of recent circumstances she wished to regulate her thoughts before they were needed for ultimate expression. It was to be expected, therefore, that she would tax her strength to the uttermost in order to reassure her mother.

Long habit had imparted to Eulalie quite a singular aptitude for recognising a solid surface for her crutch. A particular tuft of grass, a tree root, a clump of rush, and numerous other such insignificant natural objects, which would never sug-

gest security to a casual observer, were constantly presented to her, and unerringly selected. Just now they appeared to be particularly numerous, and consequently the two advanced with such a measure of speed and security to the gateway, which opened into the trench separating the High Road from the Low, that at this point Eulalie ventured to attempt her escape.

‘Now, mother, you must go back,’ she said, decidedly. ‘You see I can get on as well as you, and I will promise to be very careful. I shall soon be down there. Don’t fret about me.’

‘You do get on a deal better ’an I’d ha’ thought. Strange curious thing use be. I could never go a step like that, Lalie.’

‘Of course not. And, mother—’ she gave

her mother a peculiarly expressive look of entreaty. ‘Don’t ask Miriam anything about it until I come back. Will you?’

The mother looked at her in some doubt, and gave no answer.

‘Don’t ask her, mother,’ the other went on, more earnestly. ‘Will you?’

‘No, Lalie, I want if you don’t wish it. But be it about the gentleman?’

‘Yes, it is. She has fallen in love with him, and she is unhappy about it. I shall soon be back.’

The gate was closed, and Eulalie went on her way.

It was not that the girl had any real trepidation in fronting the enterprise upon which she had set off; but she was of a peculiarly sensitive structure, and she had passed through experiences in the last

twelve months. When she reached that living stump of an oak-tree at the corner,—on the twigs of which still hung the dead brown rustling leaves of the former year, and in the crevices of the bark and decay of which grew green polypody fern, moss, and tufts of grass,—when she reached this she stood still, with her eyes to the ground. The wind whistled in the wood around her, and flung a rain-drop against her cheek from the dangling hazel catkins which leaned over the fence. Queer little birds chirped plaintively to her from the bushes around, eyeing her curiously; but the big magpie slipped away shyly without making any sound.

Such surroundings were a fit setting for Eulalie's speculations; sombre enough, but of a natural simplicity. She was bent

on no vulgar errand of restitution. Material thought upon this topic could never assail her. She could not reach so far as that. If passionate human love did not supply every possible necessity, for body and soul alike, she simply was not aware of the fact. And this love of hers was intensely human ; no mere ethereal abstraction to live upon the air alone. Not the love of any spiritual enthusiast, any self-deluding theorist. The physical presence and contact was its essential adjunct and support. Tender, refined, superlatively idealised as it was, it was a sublimation of the sense no less than of the soul ; by no means the superplanter of them. It was the fiery love of the poet in all its living glow ; but, it is true, with one unpoetical limitation.

Readily would Eulalie have owned this very predicament of Miriam's the glorious end of it, its highest justification ; but one modification was to her essential. It must be acknowledged of the world. She was not poet enough to dispense with the human law. That must sanction the bond. Love was to her, inseparably, marriage. It was Rowe's repudiation of this essential which had given her the shock,—which had finally shattered the lingering image of her ideal.

But no, not finally, even yet, for at moments the whole problem was capable of eluding her mental grasp. This could not be the action of that He who first found her at the Downs, and first definitely focussed her indeterminate vision there ;

who spoke to her of ‘Sesame and Lilies,’ of ‘Queens’ Gardens,’ and other equally sunny domains of the poet’s creation. This one day at her old cottage had so vividly recalled all that, slightly to the dimming, perhaps, of intermediate impressions.

The reconciliation of moral inconsistencies was not a task for Eulalie’s powers. The nightingale does not analyse the theory of its song, nor the swallow of its flight. How should this other unconscious natural creation analyse the theory of her love? It was not a theory to her; knew not of phases to be past, modifications to be admitted. It was herself; it was her life. She knew that it did not appertain to all, had never expected to find it appertain to any; until *he* arrived. Life itself

must cease ere she could modify : and not he ? The problem constantly eluded her. It would not assume its terms.

This was the difficulty assailing her. How could her heart speak ? Could she but tear her bosom open and show it there to him, it were convincing ; but through the tongue—— ! *He* could speak it, had often spoken it ; but she, draining the spirit only from his lips, had forgotten the words.

Time was speeding. Of a sudden, in the midst of her perplexity, it occurred to her to follow the example of prophets of old time. Should it not be given to her to speak when the needful moment should have come ? Like a ray of light this flashed upon her, and she hastened on marvellously lightened.

The difficulties of the way seemed small

to her, buoyed up by that indeterminate hope. From the slope whence the farm and village were visible, Eulalie stood to survey the fields. To approach the house was not only distasteful to her, but, as she knew, at this time most probably useless also. But no figures were to be seen over all the range presented to her. The state of the land suggested itself, and her heart sank. Doubtless he would be at the house after all. There was nothing to be done abroad.

When she reached the road, however, circumstances favoured her. Whom should she meet, but William Agg?

‘It be dirty travelling,’ he remarked, as he surveyed her.

‘It is, William. Do you know where Mr. Rowe is?’

He opened his eyes in astonishment.

‘Where ur be ! If ’ee dunt know it be difficult to say who do.’

‘What do you mean, William?’

‘Don’t Miriam know, think ’ee ?’

‘She says he is down here, but may perhaps go away to-day.’

‘Well, her be a bit out by appearances, however,’ replied the man. ‘Ur went last night, and nobody have set eyes on un since, and that be truth, Lalie.’

Eulalie appeared stunned by the news, so obviously so that the rough countryman eyed her sympathetically.

‘Poor maid, there be trouble on ’ee, I count.’

‘But when will he return, William?’

‘Nay, ur left no word on that item,’ replied he, drily.

'Are you quite sure that he is not about here? Or gone to Knapstone? Or—'

'Sure enough o' that. Housekeeper dun't think as us'll see un again i' Murcott, but of course it be hard to say what may hap—'

Eulalie turned away, hopelessly convinced of the futility of her journey.

'Be that all as you come down for, Lalie?' the man asked after her; but she paid no heed to him, and re-entered the fields, her heart this time dead within her.

As though to celebrate her discomfiture, as she ascended the green slope slowly and laboriously, the wind began to fling more plentiful raindrops about her. She was not aware of it, for her eyes were

turned invariably to the ground, although they were affording her so little assistance in the choice of a pathway. Her instinct for firm surfaces was frequently at fault now. Her crutch would sink some inches into the wet turf, and more than once threaten to overturn her; but she battled manfully—no, doggedly, instinctively only, knowing no conscious impulse to take her forward. In passing into the second field, the rain beat faster, and with the same appearance of indifference she raised the umbrella which she had brought to shelter her. The wind blew so fiercely that she found it difficult to poise, and very speedily the muscles of her hands and arms were strained and aching; but she laboured on.

It was as she was nearing the entrance

to the wood, heartless and numb, that the first casualty occurred to her. A great gust of wind came swaying the tree-tops, and roaring in its progress, making the starlings and the rooks balance themselves skilfully on the branches ; but of course it was inaudible to Eulalie. Not until it had actually reached and overwhelmed her was she aware of its approach, and in the confusion of the moment she lost command of her movements. The umbrella was wrenched altogether from her grasp and rolled some considerable distance down the incline. The girl herself fared little better, for, unbalanced by the shock, which had assailed her so unexpectedly, she fell heavily upon her side, and her face was thrust rudely upon the wet grass.

The incident seemed small to her, and, scrambling up in such manner as she was able, she was ultimately erect again upon her crutch, and in a short time also had regained possession of her umbrella. But, as she reclimbed the bank, she was first conscious of her weariness. Without knowing it, the passage of these two large uphill fields had exhausted her immoderately, for the labour which she had entailed upon herself by disregard of her pathway had been excessive. Upon the gate she leaned, from mere physical necessity, and, as she had not troubled to repair any of the disorder which her fall had occasioned, she presented a pitiful appearance.

The mere exertion had brought some colour to her cheeks, and long, straggling hair, wet and lank, spread over them un-

heeded. Grass though it had been, some mud stained the left side of her face, as well as the plain, old-fashioned waterproof by which she was enfolded. Her eyes, though very clear and brilliant, seemed wanting in expression, unless it were for a shrinking, timid gaze like that of a hunted hare which occasionally passed over them. Somewhat rested, or rather with her scattered senses in some degree recalled, Eulalie opened the gate and passed through. It was here that her difficulties seemed to begin.

Presumably hope and faith in the cause which actuated her movements had imparted that extraordinary vigour with which she had set off; as certainly the removal of such incitements had now upon her return deprived her of it. She paid

no sort of heed to her footing, nor yet to the screening of herself from the pelting rain. Her umbrella she had not put up again since the discomfiture it had occasioned, and her crutch would occasionally sink to an alarming depth in the mire. She had gone but a short distance along the trench when it seemed imperative that she should rest again, for her strength appeared wholly to have left her; but there was not a dry spot to receive her.

She knew that there had been a fallen trunk lying alongside here until quite recently, but when she looked about for it, she saw the bare groove in the earth where it had rested so long that the grass had died beneath it, but from which it had so lately been removed. Therefore she

was constrained to hobble on, proceeding but slowly.

Meanwhile, the two at the cottage were awaiting her return. Eulalie had vouchsafed no word upon the object of her journey, but of course both Miriam and her mother could easily infer it. As to what she definitely intended, or expected from it, they made no conjecture. Circumstances could only reveal them that. True to her promise, Mrs. Medlicott put no question to Miriam, but in moving about her employment she examined the girl critically, as the latter sat in listless wretchedness upon her chair. Whatever might be the upshot, and the good woman was fully prepared for the worst that fate could hold in store for her,—whatever

might be the end of all, the shattered withy had clearly foretold it.

It was about one o'clock when Eulalie had started,—time proceeded, until now the cottage clock was striking four. Even for the cripple, hindered as she was, if she accomplished the rest of the journey in anything like the manner in which her mother had seen her commence it, it could not occupy her more than half-an-hour. Allow her ten minutes extra for coming back, owing to the first steep fields, and she must, if now near at hand, have had an interview of close upon two hours' duration with the gentleman at the Pool. No doubt he had made her rest. Eulalie herself had said something about the possibility of riding back. Certainly it would not be

like him to allow her to return upon such a journey alone. But true, he had been rather changed of late. Ah, it was a curious, uncertain world.

Yet another hour went by, and Miriam never moved, neither did Eulalie return. Throughout the afternoon the rain had got more and more persistent, and the wind blew a steadier gale. This doubtless had now detained her,—but the mother nevertheless could not forget that her daughter had undertaken not to be long, and when people can get a ride they do not shelter from the rain. At any rate, she would prepare the tea. Eulalie could not in any case be long now, and she would sadly need a cup to warm her. The kettle had sung for a long time, and it speedily boiled.

‘ ‘St think as I’d better make the tea, Miriam?’ said the woman, when this consummation was effected.

‘ Yes, mother. She can’t be long.’

So Mrs. Medlicott made it, and put the tea-pot on the top of the oven. Then she too sat down, linked her fingers, letting the thumbs play together, and looked into the fire. Perhaps she dozed, she had been very hard at work for a day or two, —at any rate, she could hardly believe that those were indeed the strokes of six. But there could be no doubt about it, and to her knowledge the clock could not be more than ten minutes wrong, either way. So she jumped up in alarm.

‘ Miriam, I be sure as there be something wrong. Lalie ’ud never ha’ stayed all this time.’

'I be getting frightened, mother, and all,' whimpered the girl, simply exhausted by her emotion.

'Then I shall go and see,' said the other, decidedly.

Miriam offered neither opposition nor general comment. She wanted her sister back very much, without knowing exactly why. Perhaps Eulalie seemed a safeguard to her, or she would feel less desolate with her beside her. Certainly she felt drawn to nobody else.

It was raining hard now, so the mother had to effect considerable wrapping before venturing to issue forth. When she went, Miriam listlessly followed her to the doorway, and with her handkerchief to her lips the girl watched her mother disappear

into the wood. As the rain beat in so, she was constrained to close the door again, and return to her chair.

How long she sat there she could not have determined, for time had no significance to her. She only knew that, after a period of stillness, the door was hastily thrown open, and her mother, in a state of violent agitation, burst into the room.

‘Come away, Miriam,’ cried the woman, with what distinctness she was able, for tears choked her utterance. ‘Here be Lalie in the mire—been lying there for hours—I’ll never forgive myself for this . . .’

This seemed to resuscitate Miriam, for she leaped with alacrity from her chair, and ran to the doorway. The two left

the garden together and plunged into the wood. The woman could give but incoherent answers to all Miriam's questions, but their tongues went incessantly as they proceeded. They slipped and splashed through the mud and water which now covered the pathway until they got to the gate out of the High Wood.

'Here her be! Here her be!' moaned the afflicted mother, as they were approaching the gateway. 'I'ev no thought of seeing her alive again—never. My poor little Lalie! O—Oh!

In the middle of the cart-track which marked the centre of the trench between the two woods, but a few yards away, Eulalie was lying. From the appearance of her clothing, her hat and hair, it was obvious that she was drenched with rain,

and must have been lying there for three or four hours. At the sound of their approach she sat up, and then it was seen that the water poured from her garments at every point. Her beautiful hair was matted together like wet seaweed, and the water even trickled over her face. She herself knew that for at least a couple of hours there had not been a particle of her body dry, and, after the heat into which her previous exertion had put her, she was now as cold as stone.

Miriam fell upon her with an outburst of passionate affection, but Eulalie at length restrained her.

‘How was it, Lalie? What happened to you?’ she then asked, as the two raised her from the ground.

‘The crutch slipped into the rut and I

fell with my whole weight upon it, and it broke. I scrambled on to here, but I was so tired that I couldn't get on further.'

And the two listeners wept again.

By taking an arm on either side, Eulalie got without difficulty to the cottage. Her spirits seemed to have revived greatly under the Spartan treatment to which she had been subjected, and she upbraided the others with their tears.

'Don't be so troubled, mother,' she would say cheerily. 'What harm is done? I am hot enough now. And, oh! what do you think? I believe I saw my little Netta looking at me from a tree, but she wouldn't come.'

But nobody made any sort of reference to the object of her journey.

CHAPTER IX.

DIALL'S TRUST.

'WHAT is—what can be the meaning of this?' repeated Diall, consternation and perplexity ruffling his brow, as he stood upon the hearthrug with the letter just opened trembling in his hand.

Barbara rose, and without word took it from him and perused it.

It was a brief letter from a London solicitor, stating his instructions from Mr. Edmund Rowe to beg the favour of Diall's

attendance upon him, at such time as he should find it convenient, in order to discuss matters relating to property known as the Pool Farm, Murcott, in the county of Gloucester.

From the information afforded, neither could pretend to hazard an explanation; but it was singular that both Diall and his wife should feel a vague instinctive impression that something unpleasant was beneath it.

It was a long time since they had heard from Rowe, and throughout the whole of the three months of the year his few letters had been noticeably brief and inadequate. Here, undoubtedly, was the mysterious issue.

‘ Of course you will go at once, Roger.’

'Undoubtedly. I will call there this morning.'

Even the collected Barbara had to confess that day to some of the restlessness of unappeased curiosity. She would get a book and try to read, but immediately it was thrown down again; she would try to work, and prick her finger; go out and come in again with no recognizable purpose. As the time for her husband's return drew nearer, her uneasiness perceptibly increased, and for half-an-hour before his appearance she had abandoned herself simply to aimless pacing of the floor.

A quick glance at Roger's face afforded her no reassurance. He did not habitually affect an expression of such introspective gravity. His glance was open; bidding

defiance to the world, perhaps, but in a genial hearty manner. Now he suggested the aspect of self-conscious dejection, shaded by a measure of wrath.

‘Sit down, Barbara,’ he said, touching her gently, ‘and I will explain it all to you.’

In a straightforward manner Diall gave the result of his interview. Rowe, in preference to a direct communication with Diall, had confided the whole of his position to his solicitor, with a view to that gentleman’s disclosing it to his former friend. Without any disguise to material facts, it was now related to Barbara.

‘Rowe does not appear, then?’ interposed she, at one point.

‘He prefers to be non-existent. Pre-

sumably we have seen the last of him. Well, the practical outcome of it all is this. He intends to settle the whole of his Pool Farm property upon Miriam, unconditionally, with me as trustee for her. He wishes to emphasize some refined distinction as to the object of his doing so: not the price of poor Miriam's womanhood, and so on, and so on. That we may take for granted, but it would hardly be Rowe if it were not made much of.'

'He has altogether fled from Murcott, then?'

'A couple of days ago. I shall spend next Sunday there.'

Barbara seemed excessively moved by her husband's information. Tears were resting on her eyelashes, a very unusual manifestation for her.

‘So ends the ideal, dearest,’ said Diall, walking over to her; ‘perhaps he will now confront the practical.’

‘But—but, why does he not marry Miriam?’ she asked, vehemently.

‘Trust me, Barbara, he is right in not doing so.’

‘Right!’ cried she, indignantly. ‘You my husband, can say that!’

‘Yes, darling, I can say it and maintain it, too. Let us abandon the ideal; you see to what it has led us. Do not let us aggravate the situation, by demanding quixotic reparation. He is about as fitted for the life-long companionship of Miriam as—as you were for that of himself, say. It would profit neither of them.’

‘Then he is a mean and a despicable

man,' said Barbara, her eyes flashing the tear-drops from before them.

Despite his vein of cynical composure, Diall's heart warmed at this enthusiasm in his wife. He perhaps felt that it was a gratifying outlet for one side of his own instincts. In this he would not allow himself to gainsay her.

'If Miriam is not fit for him, how dare he so cruelly deceive her? I know her nature well enough, and she is not a frivolously-minded girl. It is not a case in which the blame can be easily divided, so you are thinking. Generally it is, but it is not so with Miriam. I know it is not.'

'My own dear wife, I would not insult you by offering any extenuation of what

is past. I trust you know that. It is diabolical beyond any form of possible expression ; but marriage would not mitigate the evil. Now that Rowe has passed through his phase, such a marriage could end in nothing but wretchedness.'

'Then the man's nature is flagrantly worthless. A phase !' cried Barbara, passionately. 'Are human lives to be sacrificed to the surmounting of passing phases, even if the life to be completed be of such obviously superlative value as that of Mr. Edmund Rowe? One life is worth as much as another, and nothing shall convince me to the contrary.'

'You forget, dear,' replied Diall, calmly, 'that I do not permit him to work out his phases upon ruined lives. That I cannot, would not, I hope, attempt to justify. I

wholly accept your view of the sanctity of the very least of human life. That is not at all my point. That part is *done*; I only now speak of the modification of the ultimate issue, the part which is to come. The last state might prove to be very much worse than the first.'

'Then that proves his nature base,' asserted Barbara. 'In what is it that Miriam is failing, even for such an excellence as that of Mr. Rowe? Nothing in the constitution of her nature, physical or spiritual; merely in some shadow of a trumpery convention. Not intellectual enough, I suppose, forsooth! A man with the smallest particle of manhood, who had done this, would devote the whole remainder of his existence to the removal of such a shallow distinction. He would adjust himself to

the life that he had appropriated, and lead it gently on towards his own.'

' But, Barbara, this is transcendent. The world is practical. Human nature is, unfortunately, somewhat below this.'

' Then I loathe the world, and I loathe human nature.'

' Heroes, darling, would no doubt behave as you would have them; but it is to be regretted that heroes do not abound under our contemporary civilization. Let us hope that they will, some day.'

Barbara had given her word, and said but little more: but later, when alone, she wept for Miriam.

On Saturday afternoon, then, Diall took train from Paddington. There had been much discussion as to his wife accompanying him, but they had resolved

against it now at first. She contented herself with sending a letter to the sisters. Diall would have to be there again very soon, and then she would go with him.

He had got away by an earlier train than usual, and he reached Mureott whilst it was still light. The weather had improved, and, as he drove up to the old homestead, it was an exquisite evening, calm, cool, and fragrant. The sun had gone behind the High Wood a short time before, a blackbird whistled loudly from the orchard, and a bat had just come out there.

Diall partook of the provision prepared for him, and immediately thereafter set off in the deepening twilight for the prosecution of his business. An interview with

Luke Limbrick constituted the first portion of it. This man he found at his cottage, and at length induced him to take a walk with him. Late circumstances had of necessity affected Limbrick's attitude to Diall. He was so closely connected with the author of all the local mischief, that it would have required more than average nature to ignore it. The visitor therefore found his acquaintance not at all disposed to be communicative. A sullen ill-humour, arising no doubt from anger unable to find effectual vent, characterized the young countryman, and he seemed to resent the kindly intentions of Diall. But the latter was of course prepared for this, and adjusted himself accordingly.

Finding other openings unfavourable, he plunged at length into his main topic.

'Luke, I want you to manage the Pool Farm for me.'

At such a remarkable proposition, Luke's heart at first instinctively leaped with professional excitement, but this was speedily checked by countervailing impressions.

'I wunt do it, sir,' he said, with abrupt emphasis.

This was perhaps blunter than Diall had expected, but it was at least vastly preferable to dissimulation.

'Why won't you, may I ask?'

'Because I wunt have no hand in anything as that man touches.'

'Certainly not. Do you think I have so little respect for you as to make any such request? That man has no longer any sort of interest in the Pool Farm; he will never receive another farthing from

it. What I ask you to do is for myself alone, and not as a disguise for—any other man. I have not seen Rowe since he left here, nor have I heard a word from him. I believe, though, that he has left the country, and that I shall never see him again.'

'None the less, I can't do it, sir.'

This was a shade less conclusive, and Diall felt encouragement.

'Luke, you must do it. You will do me a kindness—only me, mind, no other man behind me; and you will simply make yourself. The experience will be invaluable to you, and there is nothing at all to hinder you from carrying on your own land as well. You will think about it to-night, and see me again to-morrow. Now, how are they at the Downs?'

'About as bad as they can be. Eulalie be a-dying, so the doctor says.'

Diall started with the shock of such an announcement.

'Dying! But we have never heard of her being ill. What is the matter?'

With pardonable immoderation, Limbrick told the story of Eulalie's adventure, and how the immediate consequences to her had been acute inflammation of the lungs.

'And, if she do die, he've killed her as well,' he asserted, loudly.

'Certainly he has,' was Diall's less aggressive comment. 'Then I mustn't go up there to-night?'

'Better go in the morning, sir. This afternoon the doctor didn't think as she'd live through the night, and they be in

mortal trouble about it, as well they may.'

Diall really felt this blow almost more than the original one. Phases could scarce offer extenuation for this catastrophe. He walked on a long way in silence, picturing perhaps what the news was to be for Barbara. He was unable, too, to throw off that uneasy sense of his own personal implication in the issue. He, he himself, by decided action at the critical juncture, might have averted the whole of it. At length he felt the necessity of freeing himself from Limbrick : he must be alone.

' Well, Luke, that is what I wished to ask you. About the farm you will answer me to-morrow, and I can look out for somebody else if you then decline it. Good-night.'

Luke paused, then stammered.

'If it be as you say, sir,—not doubting your word, of course,—I don't see what should hinder me from telling you now. If that man have no hand or part in it now, I'll forget as he ever had it, and take it for you as if it were Master Winnett's.'

'That's what I meant, Luke,' exclaimed Diall. 'You see——'

And immediately they plunged into a discussion of the numerous practicalities involved, as they hastened their steps towards the Pool Farm itself. Limbrick spent the evening with Diall in consultation, and terms were satisfactorily adjusted between them.

The next morning, when the church-bells were flinging their music to the sparkling breeze, and skylarks were high

in the sunlight singing vociferously, Diall took his way over the fields to the High Wood ; the path which, under such different conditions, Eulalie had taken scarce a week ago. All was so brilliant now, so peaceful and smiling, that this townsman felt it difficult to conceive of trouble and death as having any possible place in the midst of such a scene. Despite himself, he could not retain his sombre thoughts in the face of such surroundings. Involuntarily they were transfigured, and turned into calm, soothing reflections as he walked.

It was delicious in the wood. The sunlight glistened through the network of twigs and branches, illuminating here a vivid patch of moss, or there the white star of some adventurous anemone. For

the primroses Diall had as yet to look, but when he came to rake amidst the brown, dead leaves which hid the undergrowth, he soon procured a posy of them for Barbara. Pocketing them in content, he continued his ramble, slowly and reflectively.

Upon reaching the last gate he paused. There stood the woodland cottage close before him, struck by the sunlight. Snowdrops and crocuses, and a bush of the purple daphne, bloomed in the garden, and the delicate scent of the latter came to him upon the breeze. Around him the silent, purple wood, about which the birds were twittering; before, the green, smooth, undulating downs with the sheep dotted over them grazing. For half-an-hour he gazed upon these placid surroundings calmly, not, as at another time he might

have done, ecstatically; for he knew that Eulalie was dead, and knew it when first the cottage burst upon his view.

At length he decided to go forward, at first he had been in doubt. The door was closed, and he knocked. Nobody answered. He knocked again, and in a second or two Mrs. Medlicott opened.

‘Eh, Mr. Diall!’ she exclaimed, in a shrill tone, staring at him through her tears.

‘You will forgive me intruding at such a time, Mrs. Medlicott,’ he began.

‘Come in, sir; come in. It be uncommon kind of you to come. Lalie be gone home scarce an hour ago.’

Diall had letters from Barbara in his pocket to deliver, but under the circum-

stances he retained them. Barbara had not written them with any view to a scene of this kind.

' You'll be kind enough to come and see her, sir,' cried the afflicted woman. ' Her be as beautiful as when her were a child. Eh, more than that, for her be one of God's angels now, and her do look one, every bit. There beunt none more beau-tifuller than she there.'

The visitor was very deeply moved by the circumstances to which he had entered. On an old-fashioned black hair sofa against the wall, Miriam lay at full length, her back only visible, for her face was buried in the cushion. She did not move at the sound of the voices, and Diall delicately avoided glancing in that direc-

tion. He ascended the little cottage stairs after the weeping mother, and, as he stepped into the sunlit bed-room, he was vividly reminded of the other recent circumstances under which he had had to be present at a similar scene. There was the very ray of sunlight between the casement and the blind, but it did not ~~lay~~^{lie} across the feet of Eulalie as in the old man's case. Instead, it smote the corner of the pillow upon which the angel's face was lying, and, in doing it, illumined to a ball of gold a bright-eyed tawny squirrel reclining there unmoved.

‘ Bless the little thing,’ said the old woman through her sobs. ‘ It came to her on Friday, and has never left her since. And it joyed her heart ever so—ever so. Thank God for it !’

After a few minutes' silent homage poor Diall descended the stairs, and fled from the cottage in a state of greater distress than in his life he had hitherto experienced.

CHAPTER X.

'FRESH FIELDS.'

WEEKS had sped on into months, and still the defeated idealist remained non-existent to the two or three friends that he had once counted. Diall and his wife at first talked frequently about him. Roger had indeed taken all possible measures for discovering his whereabouts, but without result. He had, of course, corresponded with the Rev. Paulinus Rowe upon the subject, but the uncle acknowledged himself as

ignorant as they. He indeed suggested that his nephew might not unnaturally have left the country, but undertook to supply any certain knowledge which he might at any time become possessed of. As no further communication had ever been made by the clergyman, the pair in Chelsea could only conclude that his suggestion was the right one, that their erratic Rowe had expatriated himself as a concession to a violated conscience, and that he had resolved therewith to be defunct to his former friends. Thus it happened that the man became matter of history at Chelsea, and as a topic of conversation arose only at (ever widening) intervals.

In the meantime, it had chanced to a Mrs. Eliza Humphreys, of No. 99, Short

Street, Camden Town, to secure a rather remarkable lodger. He had come casually like any other lodger, attracted by the card. Being a man of singularly few words, and of ‘a backward glance’ as to the eye, (Mrs. Humphreys’ own characterisation,) he had at first inevitably excited suspicion. But upon him suspicion in a landlady found it difficult to thrive. Odd he was, unquestionably, but that meant little: more or less, all men were so. His solid apartmental attainments instantly outweighed that. A man that preferred a weekly settlement, and kept to it: a man that never happened to be short of change until Monday, that never balanced the coal-box when she had just filled it, that left the key in the chiffonier, (although it was a stock one,) and that never by any

chance received a visitor—was not a man to be ungenerously regarded, even if his hours were occasionally a little irregular. If he did his duty so flagrantly in one main direction, it might without impropriety be taken for granted that his virtue extended to the less material generalities. So things were admirably adjusted between Mrs. Humphreys and her lodger.

Reading and writing seemed to be the man's principal occupation, and the number of books that he possessed was extraordinary. For the first month these volumes had remained in the packing-cases that they had arrived in, much to the inconvenience of persons using Mrs. Humphreys' entrance passage; but after that time two book-cases had been purchased, and the boxes unpacked, a movement

which made the good woman's heart thrill to the note 'permanency.'

Here then had Rowe seen fit to pitch his camp. Upon abandoning the Pool Farm property, in which the bulk of his resources had been invested, his pecuniary position underwent a material change, although he was still far enough removed from want. He was able to realize a sum of about two hundred pounds, which he banked for current use, in addition to retaining an investment which brought him in eighty pounds a year. Thus equipped he set off upon the new course which he had marked out for himself.

The equipment would have seemed to be but indifferently adequate had the course lain permanently in the direction in which it started. For the first few weeks Rowe

abandoned himself unrestrainedly to the town's distractions. It seemed as though his object were to drown himself, once and for all, in the fierce torrent of life which is for ever swallowing there, just as so recently he had resigned himself to the idyllic calm of the pastures. His cravings were limitless, insatiable. For the nonce he would scale the highest point which his means and personality could attain unto, then again plunge to the lowest depth that his courage would permit. But at length, his zeal abated and he unpacked his books.

From this moment his development proceeded less hysterically. He resumed his pen, and was content with the recreation of an average mortal. Indeed, frequently he was content with very much less, often reducing his indulgences in that direction,

for a fortnight at a time, to an afternoon constitutional to Hampstead Heath. It was thus the summer passed.

With August came another change—one morning he told Mrs. Humphreys that he should be away a month. She was perturbed, but upon being assured that he should return definitely upon a certain day, and furthermore should ask no abatement of the ordinary weekly terms during the time of his absence, she was consoled, and hoped he would enjoy himself. On the following day Rowe packed a portmanteau, and in the evening took a train from Waterloo Station with a ticket for Jersey.

A secluded nook in that island, dedicated to St. Brelade, had been a favourite resort of Rowe's in former days. He had often fled there from the distraction of London,

to read poetry and muse upon the possible realization of a pastoral ideal. Upon this occasion he went for a different purpose, but the placid background which it afforded to this newer speculation proved none the less enchanting. A few months (even, deducting the one disposed of, as before mentioned) in a lodging-house, situated not in the widest thoroughfare of Camden Town, had prepared him for the proper appreciation of such a scene as this. Hot, intensely hot, it was ; but he had nothing to do beyond finding a shaded spot amongst the rocks whence he could watch the sea-weed rise and fall upon the swell beneath his feet ; or gaze out seawards between those two bold headlands which hemmed in his little bay ; or yet again, if tired of these, recline, and seek another world in the

pages of some recent novel procured from a circulating library in St. Helier's.

But that did not wholly exhaust his methods of employment. Another he had, an intermittent one, but one to which he seemed to go with more genuine energy than to all the rest. Over this his cheeks would even sometimes flush a little, and his eyes would sparkle. As a rule, he was unaffected by the movements of the postman, but since his arrival here, he had displayed an unusual interest in him. The cause at length was apparent, for one day a paper roll was left for him. Others came at irregular intervals, and all exercised upon him a similar influence. He would take it up eagerly with pretended coolness. He would hurry to the rocks, reaching them in a state of profuse perspiration, and

there he would tear it open. Part he invariably pocketed, the remainder he as regularly rolled and re-rolled backwards, until it would lie flat upon the rock. Then he read it—it was printed matter,—with a pencil in his hand, and made an alteration occasionally. They were printers' proof-sheets that he was correcting.

In this occupation he became always deeply absorbed. So long as it continued, he was wholly oblivious of everything else about him. The water could lap, the sea-gulls could soar unheeded. Even the seed-pods of the gorse, by a tuft of which he generally sat, could crack and scatter their contents without his being conscious of it. Sometimes, it is true, his eyes were lifted and travelled out to sea, but they saw nothing material there presented. If the

boat of some pleasure-seekers approached him, if the voices and the laughter, and the splashing of their oars were audible, they were not audible to him. He knew, however, that this sometimes did happen, so that when he came down for the particular purpose referred to, his retreat was chosen more with a view to seclusion than was otherwise the case.

One day, however, was to prove an exception. He had received a larger portion of sheets than was usual, and was immersed in their perusal. They embraced a critical part of his story, and, if that were possible, he was giving them more than his ordinary attention. He was but a few feet from the level of the water, with his back planted against a piece of rock which jutted forward and screened

him from the sea, whilst by bending a few inches sideways he could himself command a full view of it. This at the present moment he was not likely to do, for although voices and oars to another might have been audible, to him, in the midst of an alteration, they were non-existent.

Whilst in the very act of writing, he started, so violently that his muscles lost command of the pencil and it slipped from between his fingers. It rolled down the rock into the water, whilst he drew himself together like a culprit. Some sound, then, could at any rate reach him, and that only the voices of mere pleasure-seekers on the water.

‘This used to be a favourite corner of Rowe’s,’ was said in plain masculine utter-

ance from somewhere. ‘He and I have sprawled in a boat here for hours, talking of pastoral ideals. Poor Rowe! I wish he was here now, Barbara, to renew the discussion, instead of roaming the wilds of Texas. He will inevitably die out there. He is not made for it, and he is on my soul.’

‘Yes, I should like to see him, for wherever he is I fear he is wretched.’

‘And you could make him less so?’

How Rowe could picture the expression of his features!

‘Certainly I think we could. He will not make friends easily, and loneliness is pernicious for him.’

‘That was always the root of the mischief. He was a good fellow, but—the

impracticable ! I fancy somehow that he will be different now.'

' I think so.'

' The times I have urged the gospel according to Blougram upon him : here, upon this very wave.

"The common problem, yours, mine, everyone's,
Is—not to fancy what were fair in life
Provided it could be,—but finding first
What may be, then find how to make it fair
Up to our means : a very different thing!"

He knows and accepts it now, take my word for it.'

' Do you know, dear, I suppose you are right about the marriage. It is a vile world.'

' Of course, you do. At the bottom you always did. To have perpetrated that would have been the crowning height of

his madness. It would have remedied nothing, and aggravated everything a thousandfold. I think vastly the better of him for avoiding that. It proves conclusively the better element. Better purgatory for a year or two, than lower down for a lifetime, I say. But I am afraid it is the dead child that has conquered you, darling.'

'Partly, I suppose. But I am a woman, Roger.'

'Bless you, you are . . . But come, we must strike off. What's that, look? A bit of lead pencil. I must have it for a relic. It might have been his,—just such a bit as he was fond of.'

Diall had drawn it towards the boat with his oar, and was now examining it. Then he rowed away.

When Rowe felt that they were some

yards away, he peered round the edge of his screening rock and saw them. He put his glasses to his eyes, and watched them eagerly, tremulously, for more than an hour ensuing. Not until their skiff was moored, and they had crossed the expanse of sand and disappeared, did he lower his glasses. Then he had to rub his eyes.

More than once a wild impulse had assailed him: an impulse urging him to go and throw himself upon them, and drink the cup. What it would have been to him to grasp their friendly hands! Yes, even Barbara's; he knew that he could do it now as a man ought, and he felt that strength incalculable would accrue to him from the contact. But he did not go, and he did not encounter them again throughout his sojourn there. Their head-

quarters were in another part of the island.

It was late in the afternoon before he was able to complete his task for the printer, and when it was done he felt sorely dissatisfied with the result of it. He could bring no enthusiasm to his assistance. The pages he read, and to which he had been looking forward from the very opening of the story, seemed hopelessly arid and crude, and could, he was convinced, interest no soul enterprising enough to read them. He hoped that this depressing sensation might pass off with the few remaining instalments, but if anything, it was heightened. When at length he had come to the concluding chapter, meant to be engrossingly tragic, he flung it from him in loathing and despair, and

pronounced the publishers lunatics for accepting such an imbecile production.

In due course he was again in Camden Town, but he found diminished satisfaction in his seclusion there. The sense of loneliness and abandonment which had before been a cherished property, and which had positively sustained and advanced him in his resolute labours, was now only a source of irritation and depression. He could go out into the crowd, and frequently enough did so; but he could not snatch from thence a soul that he could confide in, that he could confess to, that he could exchange a single thought with. This, at any rate, the crowd could not give him, just because it was a crowd. For a single peep within a top-storey flat in Chelsea, for instance,—an insignificant abode,—

would he not sacrifice all this contact with the crowd, or all that might ever be permitted him of such? It was no longer resistible. Attain to it he must.

One Saturday morning towards the end of September, as Diall was on the point of leaving his hearth,—ever an irksome duty,—his wife, who had been idly glancing through the pages of a literary paper which had just been delivered, burst into a laugh, a long resonant laugh, which she had caught from her husband. Diall stopped and regarded her, awaiting the issue.

‘ Listen—listen !’ she cried, exultantly.

“ “ Messrs. Blank and Blank’s List of New Novels ready
at all the Libraries.

This Day, in Three Volumes,
‘ FRESH FIELDS,’

By EDMUND ROWE, author of ‘ Russ’s Wife.’ ” ’

‘What the dickens are you talking about, you rogue of a wife? Let me see, I say.’

Barbara brandished the paper in his face, until he clutched her hand and it; then he stared in beaming astonishment.

‘That settles it!’ cried Diall. ‘That means Texas to a certainty.’

‘I doubt it,’ said the wife.

‘Doubt what you like, the thing is obvious to any but the meanest intellect. I shall write to him forthwith, and implore him to come back. I shall work my redemption, see if I don’t. He is on my soul.’

‘But it gives no Texas address here,’ remarked Barbara, drily. ‘How can you write to him?’

Diall only laughed aloud whilst jotting on an envelope the publishers’ address.

Barbara thus perceived his meaning. Scarce was this done when there was a thundering postman's knock at the door, and Roger went to it. A parcel was handed in, and he returned to the room.

'Believe me, Barbara, this is the very thing. It is Rowe's hand-writing. Where from?' he added, eagerly; but his countenance instantly fell, and Barbara triumphed.

'Charing Cross!' she cried. 'They adopt our English names in Texas, don't they? But I don't think our stamps.'

Diall yielded and tore open the parcel. Yes, sure enough it was this. Three flaring red volumes with prominent type on the covers, 'Fresh Fields, by Edmund Rowe.' But Roger instantly turned to the fly-leaf.

'This is expecting too much,' said his wife.

'What on earth is the meaning of that?'

Barbara took the volume from his hand and read the inscription: 'To Roger Diall from the other half of the pencil. St. Brelade's Bay.' She only returned his stare.

'We picked up a pencil in St. Brelade's Bay; you remember, Barbara?'

'We did. I remember it well. In fact, here it is,' she added, turning to the mantel-piece. .

'There is really something mysterious about the man. We have seen his ghost, you remember. This time, *it* must have seen us. What other explanation is possible?'

'That we must settle later. Send a letter to-day, dear.'

‘ Most undoubtedly I shall.’

They talked for some time longer, but naturally resolved little.

That evening, Rowe, in the solitude of No. 99, Short Street, Camden Town, pretending to read, but in reality unable to do so, because of the parcel which his mind was following,—that evening he received, through his publishers, a letter. Needless to say, he had expected it, was tremulously looking for it, but not so soon. The envelope was rent open, and the following devoured, not once only.

‘ MY DEAR ROWE,

‘ I have sworn that you were in Texas, but you post from Charing Cross. This silence is unkind of you. Come hither the moment you receive this,

if only to explain the eerie inscription in “Fresh Fields.” Hearty congratulations from us both. But come, come to receive them.

‘Yours as ever,

‘R. D.’

Such heartiness Rowe had scarcely expected, not even after the overheard conversation in St. Brelade’s Bay, and it affected him deeply. The genuine attachment of Diall he had never doubted, but to stretch to this!

Of course, to go immediately to Chelsea was out of the question. Whatever Barbara’s attitude to him and his vagaries, and she had expressed it lenient, as yet he could not face her. It must be accomplished gradually, through Diall; but—

but—yes, it *should* be done. Their companionship he must have. It was nobly offered him, and he would grasp at it manfully. Effeminate vacillation, he felt, was now mainly behind him. It should be shown in his action.

He sat instantly to his table to scribble a reply. If he hastened, he might possibly catch the last post: if he missed it, they would not hear until Monday morning. Should they not? He laughed exultantly. They should hear that night despite postmen and regulations of the post-office.

This resolution come to, he allowed himself more time to write. He responded with unfeigned heartiness to his friend's geniality, and touched delicately upon himself and his position. Diall would understand his scruples. He must see him first,

and talk unreservedly to him. Would he have a day with him to-morrow? They could go to Hampstead Heath. The mystery of the pencil he would then unfold, etc.

When this was finished to his satisfaction, he pocketed it and issued forth. In Hampstead Road he caught a 'bus, and by a wearisome process, exasperating to him in his present mood, he found himself at length in the desired neighbourhood. It was with considerable trepidation that he ventured upon that flight of steps. In case of a collision flight was impossible, detection assured. What mattered it? Here goes! and two steps at a time he ascended until he had to stop for breath. The last two landings he took more leisurely.

This then was the door. He trembled as he stood at it. As all was still, he thrust his ear to the chink, if perchance——! Yes, it was his laugh. Voices, too, he could hear, but only as an indistinguishable rumble. Nothing articulate. A door on the landing below was opened, so he thrust his letter in impulsively and banged the knocker. Then he fled.

The next day proved peculiarly favourable to the enterprise. About mid-day two men stood alone by the flagstaff, and stared over the sweep of country to the north-west. The atmosphere was intensely clear, and shadows fitted constantly over the mellow landscape thrown from the gorgeous, clear-cut cumuli which sailed rapidly across the blue, driven by a

stiff, exhilarating north wind. Despite the leagues of unsavoury humanity which stretched so close at hand, here was still a sniff of heaven's own breath, redolent of pine and heath. The two sniffed it and felt strong, and then plunged amidst the braken and the gorse.

It was a fitful conversation, but both felt infinite content. Diall had indeed taken quite seriously to heart the wrong which he considered he had done to Rowe by his vacillation and imprudence, and by means of a little characteristic exaggeration he appropriated to himself the major part of the blame for the disastrous results of the idealist's experiment. When it becomes a matter of mutual exculpation, love may be considered as fairly well restored, and so this pair undoubtedly felt it. A

little information, however, Rowe still wanted, and in the course of the day he obtained it.

‘ And Miriam?’ he asked, disconnectedly, at one point.

‘ Poor girl, she is well again ; but I will tell you more this time next year. Suffering of course there must be for both of you, but time will mend it. It is better as it is, a thousand times.’

‘ Yes, I heard your opinion from the boat. Barbara did not always share it?’

‘ Not always. Women,—yes, even she sometimes,—look too much to the abstract sentiment. For you to have been tied to Miriam for life would have been ridiculous. To neither, in a year or two, would it have been anything but a very serious hardship.

Barbara did not pay sufficient heed to the phase. I am glad you did.'

Rowe kept silence. He had offered no word of self-exculpation, and would not, even to Diall. If his friend understood his conduct, well ; if not, he must still abide it. Self-justification, in any sense, he would not have been base enough to offer. He had committed a cruel and irreparable wrong ; he knew it and would know it to his dying day.

' What are they doing at the farm ? '

' Limbrick manages it, admirably. He does not live there, but that will follow in due course.'

Rowe asked no more.

In the course of the following weeks

Rowe was induced to renew intercourse with the second inmate of the Chelsea flat, and so time went on.

It was in the following year that Diall considered circumstances to necessitate his taking a small suburban house, whither at Easter he removed. It was under this roof that something like intercourse was resumed. Rowe, with very moderate though increasing success, and perhaps still more with the varied labours and experience which led to it, developed a more wholesome temperament, and even at length proved wholly content to leave the realisation of ideals, whether pastoral or other, to less susceptible philosophers.

It was at Michaelmas of this first year in the suburbs, whilst walking in the garden,

that Diall confided a piece of news to his friend which was to close his communications on the subject.

'Ned,' he remarked, 'Miriam was married to Limbrick yesterday. You can drink their health privately. He shall be installed in the full tenancy of the Pool Farm forthwith.'

'What do you think of her?' asked Rowe, soberly.

'Her mother characterized her better than I can when she said that she had grown into "a still solemn woman." Let us all try to achieve the same development.'

THE END.

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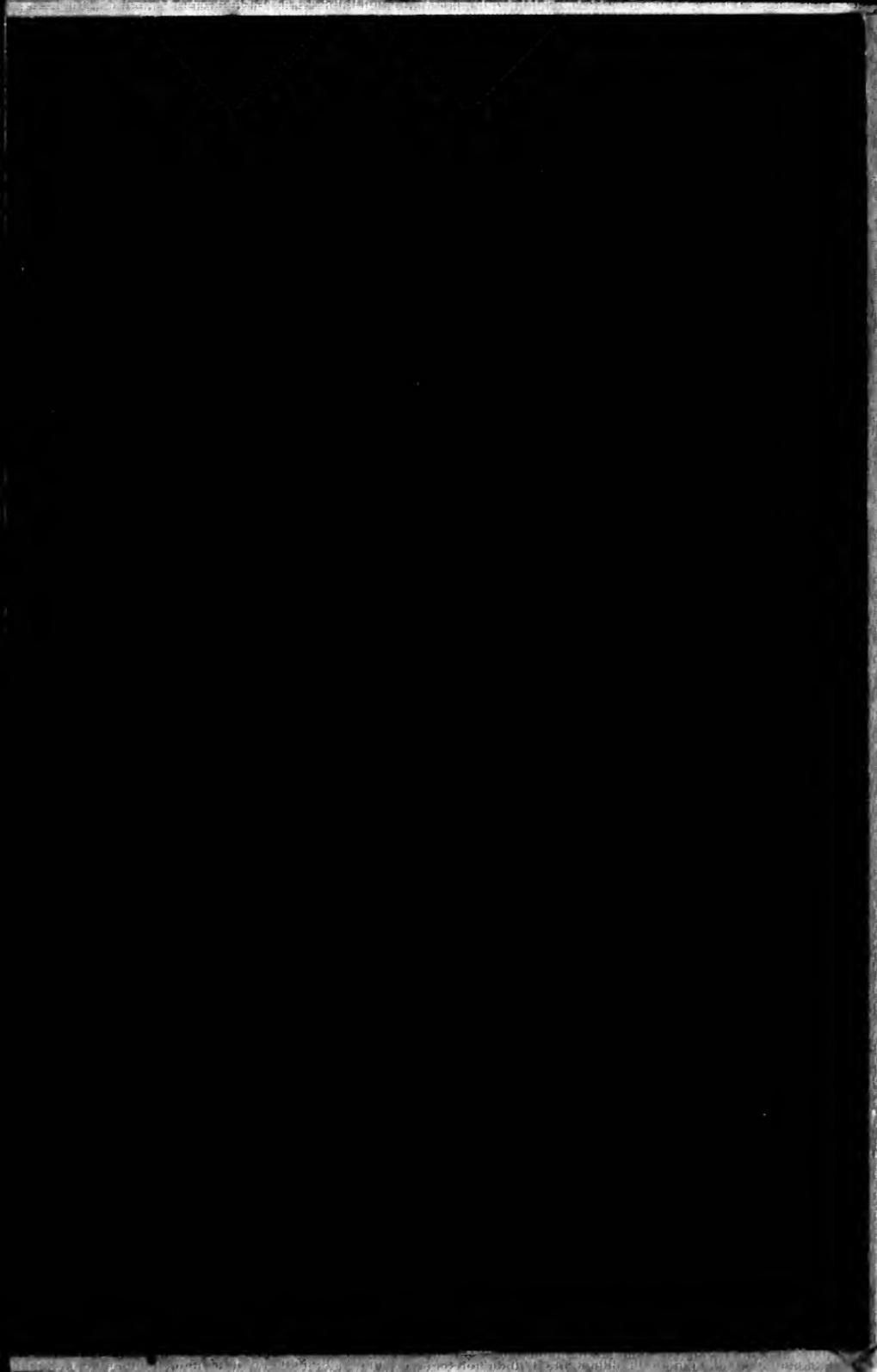
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